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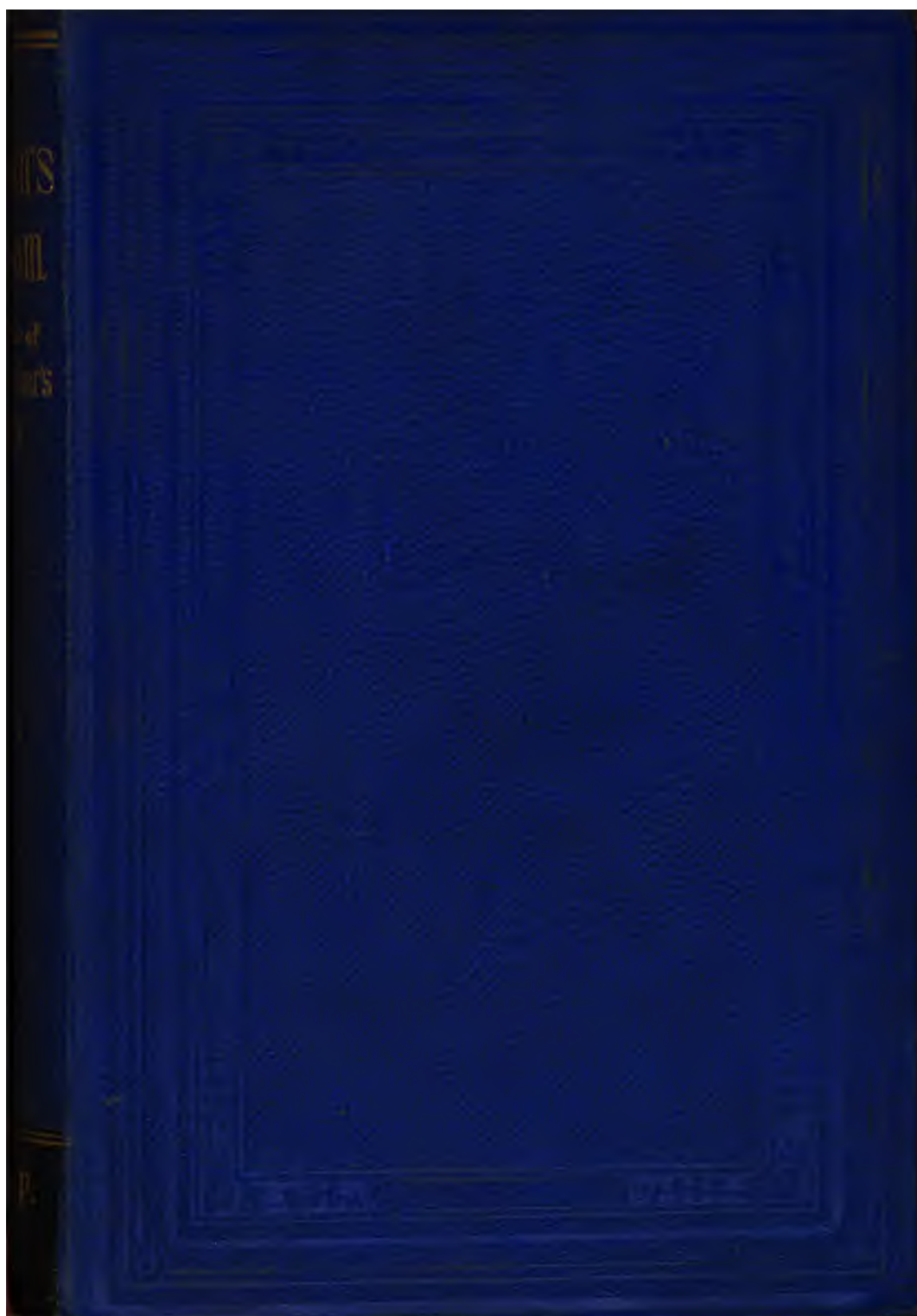
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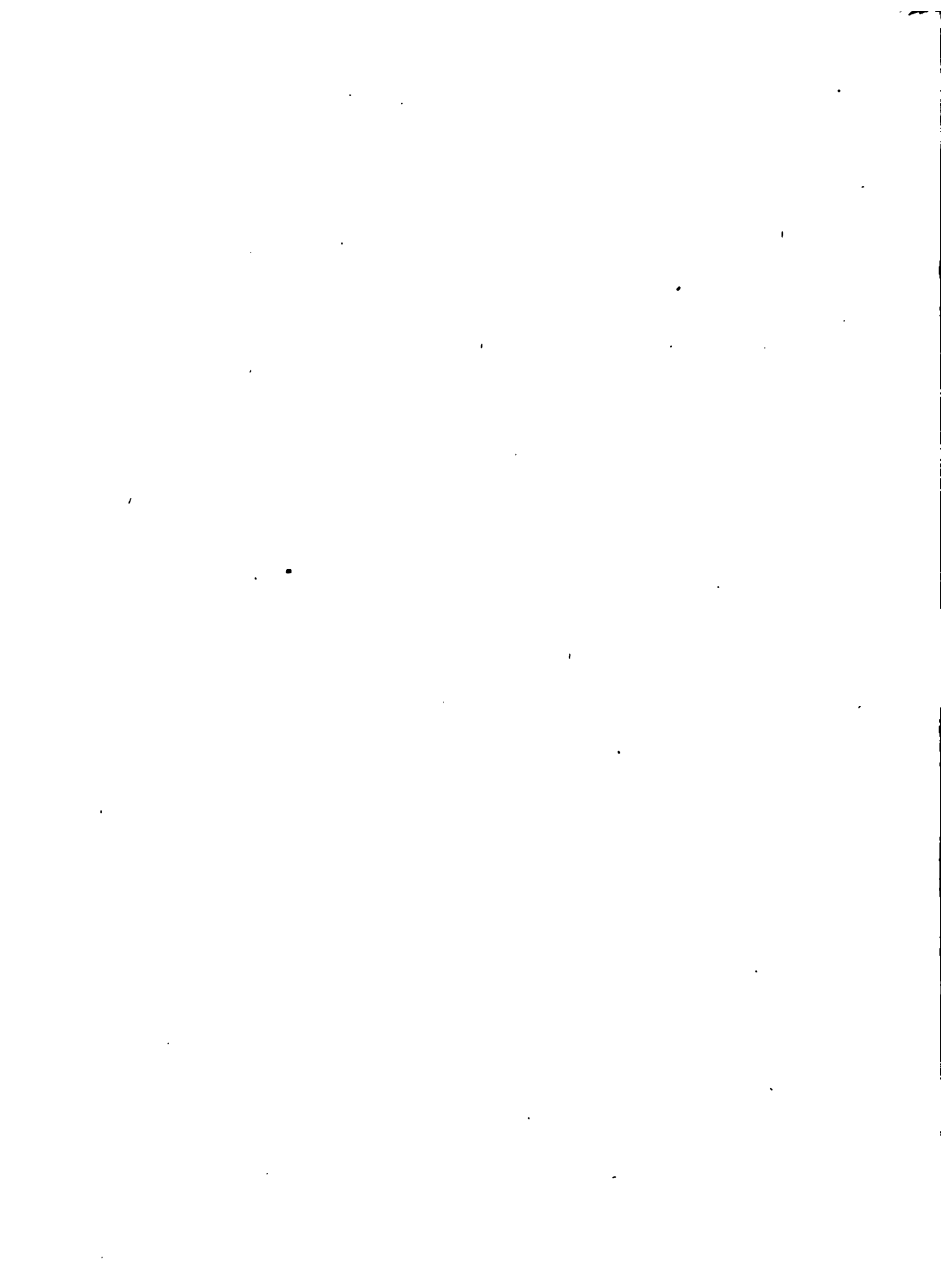


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A WOMAN'S RANSOM.

VOL. I.



A WOMAN'S RANSOM.

BY

FREDERICK WILLIAM ROBINSON,

AUTHOR OF

"GRANDMOTHER'S MONEY," "UNDER THE SPELL,"

"WILDFLOWER," "SLAVES OF THE RING,"

&c., &c.

"Who sows the serpent's teeth, let him not hope
To reap a joyous harvest. Every crime
Has, in the moment of its perpetration,
Its own avenging angel."

SCHILLER.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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TO
MY DEAR FRIEND,
JAMES MATTHEWS, Esq.,
THIS STORY
IS
DEDICATED.

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BOOK I.

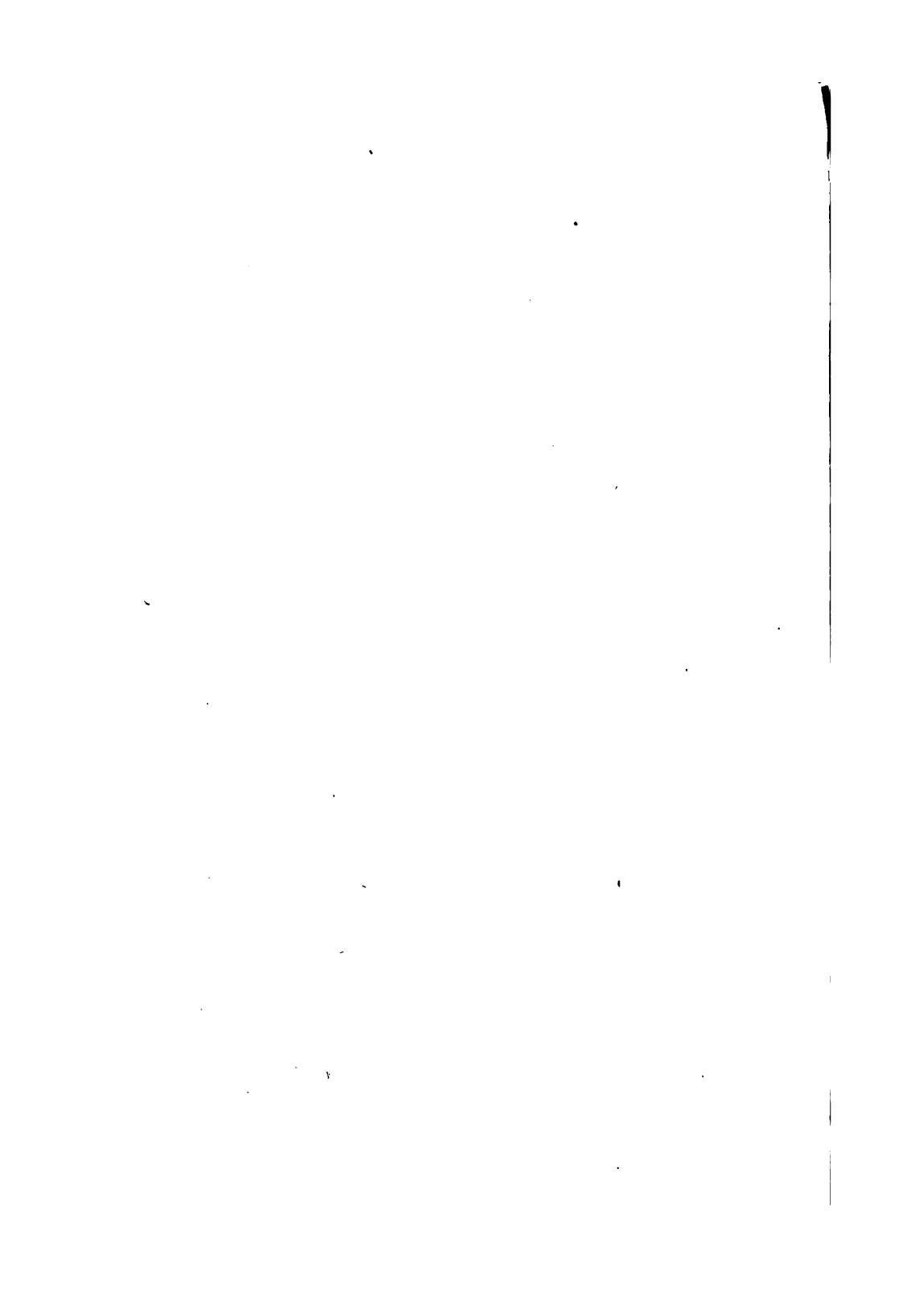
STILL LIFE.

" Where is it strong, but nere the ground and roote ;
Where is it weake, but on the highest sprayes ;
Where may a man so surely set his foote,
But on those bowes that groweth lowe alwayes ;
The little twygs are but unstedfast stayes."

A MYRROUR FOR MAGISTRATES.

" Arithmetic
Was the sole silence he was ever taught ;
The multiplication table was his Creed,
His Pater-noster and his Decalogue."

SOUTHEY.



A WOMAN'S RANSOM.

CHAPTER I.

CANUTE'S LUCK.

WE were all at home when the good news came. We had waited for it a long while ; we had built castles in the air concerning it ; we had experienced that heart-sickness which is the necessary concomitant of hope deferred ; we had given it up for lost, and had turned to the old matter-of-fact, uphill work, as though no chance in our favour were ever likely to recur again. Possibly it would be fairer to say that *I* had waited and suffered from heart-sickness ; that *I* had given up the hope of good news, and had stuck to the plans and measure-

ments with that dogged persistency for which those who have bread to earn are remarkable—that *I* had been troubled at first by the hope, and ossified, just a little when that hope went farther and farther away, and left me at the old desk in the old surveyor's office, wherein I had worked, off and on, for eleven years.

That is the fairer way of putting it, for my good mother and Ellen had not harassed themselves about the matter three days after the plans had been fastened up and forwarded to Nettlewood. They had thought them very elaborate, and that I had been a little too extravagant in the mounting of them—considering my usual luck—that the general view was a pretty landscape, and that the expenses of transit were rather formidable; and then the curtain dropped over the last “foolish idea,” and there was an end of it, for ever and aye!

In plain truth, they forgot all about it. Six months afterwards, when I, by chance, expressed my surprise that no notice had been taken of the plans, and that to my letter requesting their return, no answer had been forwarded me, my mother had looked up dreamily, and said, “What plans, Canute?” with that dear old forgetfulness of past disappointments which has made

her life a contented one, at least. I remember that I was a little mortified at the time, and did not make sufficient allowance for my mother's business abstractions, and my sister Ellen's life of oscillation between Kennington Road and the house wherein she played the part of daily governess.

Besides, had I not been designing plans all my life?—going in for competitive mansions, hospitals, town-halls, and workhouses, with a faith in my own ability, and a confidence in the fairness of my judges, remarkable to witness, after eight years of disappointments. Had not "Canute's luck" become a by-word with Ellen and my mother, between brother Joseph and his wife, even between the two apprentices at the office where I worked, and earned my forty shillings a week when business was brisk?

And then, all of a sudden, the luck came! Waiting for it so long had not soured my temper, or made me dissatisfied with the world, at least. I can assert that as honestly and proudly now as I did on the memorable night which changed the current of my life. My sister Ellen brought the news. All letters on the subject of those plans were to be forwarded to C. G., 118, Newton

Street, City. That was my elder brother's place of business—had been *our* place of business once upon a time; but more of that matter anon, when there is less in the way of the story's progress.

Ellen Gear brought the letter late one evening in the end of June, when mother and I were at home, as aforesaid. She came in with a flushed face, and her dark eyes quite aflame with delight.

"Here's good news for my dear old Canute at last!" she cried, running into the parlour wherein mother and I were playing our usual game at cribbage—five card cribbage—every night in the year—Sundays excepted—and flinging the letter in the midst of my "flush," which I had triumphantly displayed on the table.

"Good news, Ellen, my dear," exclaimed my mother, settling her spectacles on more firmly, "gracious me now, whatever makes you think of such a thing!"

She laid her cards down with the faces uppermost—she had not a hole in her hand that deal! I took up the letter, and Ellen leaned over me, with her hand on my shoulder, looking at the superscription.

"C. G. 118, Newton Street, City," she cried aloud; "what does it mean, Canute? Joseph

could not make it out," she added, "and would have sent it away again, had I not snatched it from the postman's hands and said, 'I was sure it was all right.'"

"You remembered all about it, my girl," I replied.

"A little of it," said Ellen, hesitating; "that twelve months ago you asked Joseph to take in any letters addressed to C. G. at his house. Don't you remember laughing, and almost making him laugh too, when you said that a change of address might bring a change of luck?"

I remembered all that, with the exception of Joseph's approximation to a laugh—I had never seen him laugh in my life. The world was too serious and intent a study with him to glean amusement from. A hundred times already I had told him so, and begged him not to think too deeply. It kept my mother anxious concerning him sometimes.

"And this is the luck, is it?" I said; "well, let us hope so."

"My dear Canute, what does it all mean?" inquired my bewildered mother.

"It's the answer about the Nettlewood plans—the mansion that was to be built, and the premium

of two hundred and fifty pounds that was offered in *The Builder* for the best design. Why, you haven't forgotten all about *that*?" I exclaimed a little testily.

The fragment of the old story came back at the adjuration. From the misty depths into which it had receded emerged a faint idea of my last study, my long hours over-time last year, and the mother's fears that I was ruining my health by working too hard. She remembered the plans, not so much for the style of them, as for the anxiety that they had caused her. Over and over again had she stolen to my side, and begged me to put the drawings away for *that* night—I was getting pale and thin, and surely there was no necessity to work so hard!

"Nettlewood in Cumberland, to be sure. I remember all about it now."

"And the good news may be to apprise you that the plans are awaiting your order, and will be forwarded when the expense of carriage is transmitted to those who have detained them so long," said Ellen.

"Now, Nellie dear, that is the unkindest cut of all!" I ejaculated.

Her arms were round my neck and her lips were on my cheek the moment afterwards. I had

spoken jestingly, but she had seen where the arrow had struck. God bless her! she was always a quick girl.

"Forgive me, Can," she cried, "but I thought you might be building too much on good news—and that the disappointment would be felt the more acutely when the few curt lines of dismissal met your eyes. You're not angry with my caution?"

"I, my girl! is it likely?"

"Was he ever angry in his life, Nellie?" asked my mother?"

"I can't remember. I don't think he ever was."

Then there followed a hearty laugh at my expense—as though a good temper, or an easy disposition, were something worth laughing at, under the circumstances. And whilst they were laughing, I broke the seal and decided for myself whether the news were good or bad. Decided!

There was a sudden pause—two pair of women's eyes were upon me, focussing me at the table—me, a pale-faced, light-haired young man, of an old-fashioned turn. Eight and twenty years of age, and looking more like eight and thirty—I could have wagered my head.

Stoically and philosophically I read the contents of the letter, and suffered not a reflex of the news to be guessed by the expression on the face which two women were anxiously watching. I prided myself on my composure—an actor trained to the business could not have done it better.

“Now guess,” I said.

“Bad news!” they exclaimed; my sister Ellen adding, “I am so sorry,” as though she had been the unfortunate means of raising my expectations to an unwarrantable height.

Then I could hold out no longer, and bang came my hand on the table with a suddenness that brought their hearts into their throats, and frightened my mother’s spectacles off her nose.

“It’s good news, upon my soul!”

I can scarcely make out what possessed me that night, my excitement was so unusual, and so unlike me. They thought that I was going out of my mind, I verily believe. It was the first piece of luck that had fallen to my share since I had been born—it changed me on the instant.

“It’s good news, you nervous, evil-foreboding pair of women!” I shouted; “it’s the stroke of fortune that comes to each man once in life—the tide in the affairs of men—good news!—hurrah!”

Slap came the palm of my hand on the table again—Nellie caught at the table lamp and saved the glass shade from shivering into a hundred pieces—my mother burst out crying, and wrung her mitted hands piteously.

“He’s going mad!—the poor dear boy is going mad!”

Ellen Gear looked paler than ever, but she still had confidence in me. If I had varied from my usual manner, was not this an unusual incident? And were my actions to be ever measured by the square and rule?

“I shall be better in a minute,” I said, loosening my neckerchief, “it’s all oozing out of my finger-ends by degrees. There, I’m a sober man again, grave as a judge when he puts on the black cap.”

“What an awful comparison!” cried my mother.

“Dry your eyes, mother, and pick up your spectacles,” I advised, “I am going to propose a vote of thanks to Ellen Gear, Esquireess, for the candid and handsome manner in which she has brought this news to us.”

“But why don’t you tell us what the news is, Can?” cried my sister.

“Re—re—read the letter,” sobbed my mother.

I had been brandishing the epistle in my left

hand all the while, flourishing it round and round my head like a squib on Guy Fawkes night—the suggestion of my mother reminded me of the proper method of communication.

“I’ll read the letter!”

I felt a little husky over it; my voice had some difficulty in dodging a great lump that had taken up a central position in my throat, but considering all things, the reading was got over pretty well.

“Nettlewood House, June 25th, 18—.

“Mrs. Mary Zitman presents her compliments to C. G., and begs to inform him that having carefully considered and studied the various plans forwarded to Nettlewood, for competition early in the preceding year, she has adjudged the prize for originality of design, and skill in execution, to the drawings he was good enough to send. Having resolved to commence the building without delay, she would be glad to have an immediate interview with C. G., at Nettlewood, previous to placing the work under his sole superintendence. A few lines, stating the real name and address of C. G., and mentioning the day and hour on which he may be expected, will oblige.”

“Good gracious!” ejaculated my mother.

"There is no cheque for two hundred and fifty pounds enclosed, I suppose?" asked Ellen, timidly.

"What a memory you have, girl, *now!*" I cried; "you even remember the amount of premium. No, —no cheque just at present."

I shook the letter in my hand, but no *douceur* of earnest intentions fluttered forth from its folds.

"If it should be a practical joke, Canute, dear, after all," suggested my mother, still doubtful if so much good fortune could possibly fall to my share.

"Oh! it's all right enough, mother—the cheque will follow in due course, or be presented to me at Nettlewood," I replied; "but that's only a chip from the corner-stone of my good fortune, you know."

"Only a chip—two hundred and fifty pounds only a chip! Do listen to him, please!"

"Did you not hear that I was to superintend the erection of the building; and there's a handsome salary attached thereto, of course—fair work for some time, at a fair price. It's all like sunshine after many years of gloom. This is not the usual luck you have all been accustomed to smile at."

"If it's not too good to be true, what a change, Canute!" said mother; "and, oh! dear," putting

her hand to her heart, as though a sudden spasm had shot there, "what a long way it will take you from us all, breaking up, perhaps, the little home for good."

"Never for good, whilst the dear mother and sister live. This, or something like this, will be the home. I shall come to London very often to take my old place here, and play cribbage with you, or play my hand and the old dummy's against Ellen and yours. 'We'll have no breaking up of homes again!'"

"There's a dear boy!" said my mother, taking my words for Gospel truth on the instant. If I said there should be no home-wreck, she would believe me, as though I had a superhuman power to shield her and her daughter from danger. After that the congratulations set in. My mother pressed me in her arms and had a good cry—all to herself—on my shoulder; Ellen, as she kissed me, murmured that she knew good fortune would reward my patience some day. Her great dark eyes were worlds of thought and love as they were turned to meet my own. As she stooped over me, she said :

"I don't know what to say, Can, to let you know how pleased I am—how confident I am

that this will make you so much the happier and better man."

"You were laughing at my general beatitude early in the evening," I said, laughing then in my turn.

"Ah! Canute—at a studied contentment, which was a little of an effort to please mother and me; which kept all your disappointments in life to yourself, like a good, patient, persevering fellow, who let not his shadows mar the home he made happy for them."

"I *was* content—I did not study to appear so, Nell."

"You would never own it."

"Perhaps I was losing faith in my own abilities—I was vain enough of them once upon a time."

"How many years ago?"

"No matter, no matter," I said; "the by-gones vanish away in the mist, and Fortune sheds a light on us for once. And if good luck never comes alone, why, there's *your* turn next, my girl."

"I have learned to despair already, Canute. There is nothing ahead of my life to disturb its mill-horse monotony. If I am content with teaching my thick-headed and thick-fingered pupils, that is sufficient for Nellie Gear."

I could see her thin white hand beating impatiently on the table as she spoke. My sister Nellie, ever excitable and impulsive, talking of content and life's monotony! That was the best joke we had had that evening!

CHAPTER II.

PREPARATION FOR DEPARTURE.

IN the interim between the despatch of my letter to Nettlewood House, inquiring if Tuesday morning next would suit Mrs. Zitman, and the reply, my mother had ample facilities for lecturing on the care and perseverance necessary to succeed in the new career lying then before me.

I bore the ordeal patiently; it pleased—nay, comforted—her to think that all her precepts were sinking deep within me, and that every word she uttered was to be treasured hereafter when new temptations were besetting me away from her.

“You have never been away from us, Canute, my dear,” said this good soul, “you have had no

experience of the trials that lie ever in store for those working alone in the world. You will not be led away by display, or imbibe lofty notions which will inflate you with pride and lead you to despise all the old associations?"

"Do you think so?"

"Well, I do not, my dear boy," confessed my mother, "but forewarned is forearmed, and you were always so open to impressions. And do be persevering, Canute dear; don't allow people to impose upon you so much, and save all the money you can for the rainy day which may be in store for you, and for us who may burden your progress for a long time yet."

"I hope so, mother—I hope so!"

"And Canute, dear, take a model."

"Take a what?"

"Take a model, a pattern, from your brother Joseph. See how patient, how pains-taking, how humble in his notions, and how careful with his money!"

"Very careful with his money, poor Joe!"

"Don't speak so contemptuously, Canute—a man careful with his money is a man that will grow rich, become respectable, and earn the esteem of his friends. There, don't shuffle with your

feet, my dear—whenever you begin that horrid shuffling, it is impossible for me to collect my ideas properly.”

“Take your time, mother.”

It pleased her to give me all these vague directions as to my conduct in life; she would have been unhappy for weeks after my departure if it had struck her that she had forgotten any wise adjuration, and I listened like a martyr, sitting on the end of the portmanteau I had packed, with my mother facing me, and her two little fat hands crossed in her lap. She sat by the glass door of the parlour, and kept her watch on the shop—the little bookseller’s shop, wherein the customers were few and far between, and came for postage stamps more often than anything else!

“Let me see, I was speaking of Joseph—the only shrewd head in the family, Canute—the only one who is preparing for the rainy day, and is careful in all his steps, God bless him!”

“Well, God bless him too—I bear him no ill-will, I admire his powers of self-denial. If we have not agreed very well together, it has been my fault, mother—my vile habit of speaking out with some warmth when the occasion has seemed to warrant it.”

"And you have only quarrelled about me, too—and your quarrels have soon been made up together."

"Yes—yes."

I knew by whose means that was effected—who took the trouble, for the mother's sake, to stray into the City, after one of these quarrels, and say, "Brother Joe, it upsets the old mother to think that there is a difference between us. Shake hands, man." But I did not call attention to any efforts on my own part to keep the waters flowing peacefully on—that would have been to have flung a Parthian dart at the son whom I was to take for a model. Besides, I was about to become indebted to Joseph for a few weeks—to-morrow, unless a cheque on account were forwarded in the return letter, I should be compelled to ask Joseph a favour. Hardly a favour from one brother to another, perhaps; but it was the first time that I had asked for any little help for myself, and it looked like a favour, that's all. My brother Joseph was fourteen years my senior; the children that my mother had borne between him and me had all died. Ellen and I, the two youngest, were spared her. When my father died, he left a good business behind him, an old-fashioned jeweller

and silversmith's, in an out-of-the-way street near Cheapside. There was no ready money to leave behind him, all was sunk in stock or lent out to those who required money on their plate or jewels, &c. When he died, Ellen and I were completing our education, and Joseph had just married Miss Spinks, the saddler's daughter. My father left the business to Joseph for the benefit of himself, his mother, Ellen, and me. From the business that mother was to receive three hundred a-year for life, Ellen and I a hundred a-year each, so that the reader can understand that at that period it was a safe and profitable business, and even left behind the lion's share of profit for Joseph. But after my father's death, fortune turned its back upon us. There was a robbery of the premises to begin with—then there was a dreadful year of commercial panic, with "safe houses" toppling to the ground, and speculations that had appeared first-rate—that my own father would have embarked in—turning out the most unprofitable ventures; finally, there came the bankruptcy of Joseph Gear. It was a terrible crash, and sobered Joseph—who had been even a little extravagant in his notions—for life. It taught him the value of money, the facility which it possessed for sliding

away from the finger ends—it almost made a miser of him. After the bankruptcy was settled, he had scarcely ten pounds of his own left to begin the world with. He paid three shillings in the pound, and my mother, Ellen, and I came in as creditors on the estate—her three hundred a-year resolving itself into a neat little income of forty-five pounds per annum—Ellen's and mine dwindling into next door to nothingness. My poor mother commenced business as a bookseller and fancy stationer, and Ellen, who was clever at the piano, began to canvass for pupils at the same time as brother Joseph commenced the world anew. I was in an architect's office by that time, and earning a little money; with the bookseller's shop, the little income of forty-five pounds, and the exertions of Ellen and me, we kept house together, and at least did not fall into debt. Joseph found friends to back him in the old business—my father's banker advanced him eight hundred pounds, I know—the tide turned a little, and my brother's shrewd head rose above the waters once more, though he never cared to own that he was anywhere save underneath them. This was the source of the sparring matches between Joseph and me—I maintaining that he was well off enough now to save my

mother something of the worry and anxiety of business, he talking ever of the struggle it was to scrape his money together, of the difficulty of keeping the door barred in the face of that grisly wolf that is ever haunting society. But then he had altered very much; he was already like an old man; there was no enjoyment in his home or at his fireside.

We in Kennington troubled very little those in the heart of the City; my mother paid them a few flying visits certainly, but Ellen and I did not stray in that direction more than once a year or so. We had the idea—perhaps it *was* a foolish one—that Joseph and Joseph's wife were never particularly glad to see us, and certainly kept no fatted calf in the back-yard awaiting our advent. They were careful people, objected to display, and turned their backs upon unnecessary expenses. They offered Ellen and me a cup of tea each and a few thin slices of bread and butter when we paid our annual visit; they talked of home and home matters, and gave us plenty of good advice between tea and supper-time—*supper-time*, but not supper, unless we stayed very late, and there was no excuse for keeping back the tray. Still all this I considered but extra economy, engendered by the

great shock that had once shook the house of Gear. If it turned my brother's hair grey and sowed innumerable wrinkles in his face, was it to be wondered at that it altered very materially his inner nature? He had passed through the furnace of affliction and been hardened thereby, just a little—but I had not lost my confidence in the sterling metal which was in him somewhere. And we were always pretty good friends, and only quarrelled on the one topic to which I have adverted. We jogged on pretty well together—until I was eight-and-twenty years of age I had not asked a favour from him.

This is a short preface for the better comprehension of what follows. I love a story myself that goes steadily on without turning back on fifty foggy retrospects, therefore I have judged the reader's taste by my own standard, and curtailed matters. From this time forth steadily on with *my* story, through all its labyrinth of trouble, mystery, and perplexity, darting off at a tangent into the region of romance at a time when the romance of most lives sobers down for ever!

Mrs. Zitman's letter came by the post anticipated. Wednesday morning, or Tuesday evening before eleven, P.M., would be agreeable to her—

a train left Euston Square at nine, A.M., on the Monday, for Kendal. At Kendal I changed for Bowness, Windermere, which I might reach at seven in the evening of the same day. She left to my own judgment the method of reaching Nettlewood, Cumberland, in the clear day that would lie before me. There were coaches and cars to be obtained; if I came by the Gaps—whatever that might mean—she would recommend a good mule and a guide.

All this and more—and no cheque.

“Perhaps it’s a lady patroness, that don’t intend to pay,” said my mother, doubtfully; “if I were you, I’d ask Joseph’s advice.”

“I am going to Joseph this evening.”

“I—I think I’ll come with you. I haven’t seen the dear boy for two months.”

I had grave doubts as to the advisableness of my mother’s company, for I had—though I tried to think it down—some doubts as to the manner in which brother Joseph would respond to the favour I was about to solicit. It was not likely that there were to be any words between us—but if there were any feelings to be hurt, I would have preferred as few witnesses as possible. My mother might “cry and go on”—it was a habit of hers at

times—and “scenes” were my abomination. So I murmured something about a long round of calls, and the night air being unsuitable for her, and Ellen—who read me like a book—sided with me, and thought her mother had better not accompany me, as there were business matters to talk over.

My mother understood that there was a loan of a few pounds to be asked for—she took it for granted that it was simply a matter of to ask and have. Only a few pounds—twenty at the utmost—to borrow from brother Joseph, and one likes to borrow money with as much delicacy as possible. Perhaps she had better leave me to proceed to Newton Street alone. So at eight in the evening I was in Newton Street—a dimly-lighted, dull, and narrow turning out of Cheapside, full of old-fashioned, old established shops, whose owners were all waxing fat with profit. How did they make money?—who came down there to buy and sell?—why did those in that quiet street thrive as well as the inhabitants of the noisy rattling thoroughfare into which it led? There is a mystery about City trading which I have never attempted to fathom. I was never a thorough man of business, always something of a dreamer. In

this street, a few yards from my brother's house, I encountered Ellen.

"Whatever has brought you in this direction, girl?" I exclaimed.

"I thought you would not mind my company, just for once."

"Certainly not; but mother is all alone, and——"

"And so's Canute Gear, whom I am to see so little of after Monday next."

This was a bad explanation, and she was keeping something back. If she read me like a book, there was something ever to be read in her face—the most earnest and beautiful face that ever a girl was dowered with, though I am her brother who write this. I was as proud of her beauty as my mother was in her heart—why, all the Gears were proud of Nellie's beauty, even Joseph, whose eyes wandered so little from his account books, was proud of this flower of our flock. He loved Ellen better than me or my mother, I verily believe—Ellen believed so too, and hence her appearance at my side to back my request. I saw that, though I did not venture to express as much just then, I was sorry that she had thought it necessary to stand by me, to save me perhaps the mortification

of a refusal. She had her doubts as well as I had then.

Joseph Gear and his wife were very surprised to see us—taken aback, in fact. My brother was hard at work at his “books,” a long quill pen was placed horizontally between his lips, and he was turning over leaf after leaf in search of some name, or some account which required an immediate reference. Mrs. Gear was darning a pile of her husbands’ socks, in a methodical business-like manner, keeping the darned to the left and the undarned to the right, and breathing painfully through her sharp little nose.

Joseph and his wife were a well-matched couple—their outward appearance matched as well as their dispositions. They were both short, of spare form and sharp features, possessed both the same small grey eyes, which shot unpleasantly through you when a suspicion gave light to them, or a doubt of your intentions added to the intensity of their expression. To have seen them going to church down Newton Street of a Sunday was an odd sight—for they were a diminutive, toddling little couple, and when they turned the corner of a windy day, it was so hard a struggle to

hold on by each other to prevent being carried down Cheapside.

"Sit down, Canute—take a chair, Ellen," said my brother, without removing the pen from his lips; "glad to see you—won't detain you more than a minute or two."

We spent the next minute or two specified in shaking hands with Mrs. Gear. The ceremony was of a cold, fishy character; she was not a demonstrative woman; she never said that she was glad to see us, or that she should presently put away her husband's socks and talk to us in an amiable and friendly way. We were all used to her, however, and took her as we found her, as the phrase runs. Her peculiarities had long since ceased to disturb us—the greatest surprise to us would have been to see her laying her work aside, and asking with interest about us or our affairs. An odd woman, for whom we made every allowance as our brother's wife, but for whom we did not entertain any very great affection. We might respect her humility, her untiring and irritating industry, perhaps, but towards whom there was no drawing very closely. My sister Ellen, in her younger days, had imbibed a very bad habit of

"taking off" her sister-in-law, but she had outgrown that, and though I laughed less, I was glad of it. Poor girl! I thought once that she would never look soberly at life, but a few years hard teaching tamed her wonderfully. I was sorry now to see her so often grave and thoughtful, instead of wild, and excitable, and extravagant. We are never content with the present.

Joseph Gear's minute or two lasted nearly a quarter of an hour. I expected this, and sat with my back to the wall, and my head against the paper, until my sister-in-law called my attention to the latter position, and thought the grease might come out of my hair.

Ellen was left to entertain Mrs. Gear by talking of the weather, and the heat that was increasing with every step forwards into the summer. My sister-in-law agreed with her and stitched on; there was a noble pile of the darned ones accumulating on the left side of her. Presently there was a long pause, and I was left to wonder how my brother, who seldom left home, managed to stump out the heels of so many socks.

"How's mother?" asked Joseph, suddenly becoming aware of the long silence that had ensued.

"Very well, Joseph, thank you."

"Ninety and nine are ninety-nine, and two make a hundred and one. That's good hearing, Canute."

"She's rather dull about my leaving home, poor soul. I shall cheer her up with plenty of letters when I am in the country."

"And thirty-four are one hundred and thirty-five—thirty-seven, forty-three—fifty-six—Yes, I suppose so—fifty-nine. One hundred and fifty-nine pounds—dear me! I had no idea it had run on to so much as that!"

"Not a bad debt, I hope, Joseph?"

"Oh! no," with a scared look at me over his shoulder, "I've taken care—there's good security. I never lend money without good security, Canute."

"The best plan," I answered coolly—I who had not any security to offer him for the loan I was about to solicit! That loan began to trouble me excessively, to loom before my startled senses like the phantom of a bad dream. I had had an objection to ask him from the first; now my ears burned and my cheeks tingled as the subject verged on revelation. I felt that there would be hesitation, if not refusal;—by some intuitive process, I had felt convinced of it from the first, and had

tried to ridicule the doubts which had beset me. Looking towards Ellen, I saw that her eyes were turned full of earnestness in my direction ; I gave her a sickly smile by way of return, but she guessed my nervousness, and did not smile back a reply. And yet, after all, what was it ? Why did I feel so disturbed about the result ? Surely not for the money's sake ? No, no, for the sake of that little withered man bending over his books, rather than for the money. For the sake of him who I felt ought to love me as one of his own flesh and blood, and let not the thoughts of a few pounds stand between him and his brotherly affection. For the sake of the mother who thought so much of him ; for the sake of that good opinion which I was anxious to preserve—to carry away to Cumberland with me, as a pleasant association by which I might remember him. As for the money, why, I had only to write to Mrs. Zitman and confess my poverty, or pledge a few things for a week or two. For the money I cared not one farthing—I had all my life set too little value on that grand desideratum.

Joseph closed his account-book, and put the pen behind his ear. In all my life I had scarcely seen him without a quill pen on that handy shelf.

Ellen told him once that he took it to church, and to bed with him ; and he told her in return not to be frivolous—she made too often a jest of business matters. She started in business for herself in due course, and there was not half so much jesting after that, though.

“Well, how’s mother?” he said.

He had forgotten the inquiry heretofore made, and I communicated anew the glad tidings of her health. He muttered, “That’s good hearing” again, and rubbed his thin hands over each other whilst he took stock of my general appearance.

“So you’re going into the country, Canute?”

“Yes—next Monday. I thought I’d call and bid you good-bye at once.”

“Thankee—thankee.”

“You see the architect’s business is likely to turn out well, after all. Your verdict was ever against it, Joseph, and kept me—though I never confessed it—a little unsettled.”

“I said, ‘stick to the surveying.’ Keep to the practical part, and not go dreaming on, and entering into fifty competitions for premiums you were never likely to get—half of which were already given away before the advertisement was issued.”

“Well, would it have been the best of advice?”

"That depends upon how this venture may turn out. How very cold the nights are getting, Canute!"

"Almost cold enough for a fire," I said unconsciously.

He looked at me in an alarmed manner.

"Oh! no, not half so cold as that."

I glanced towards Mrs. Gear, whom I found very much in the way just then; if I dreaded Joseph Gear's comments, I had a still greater repugnance to any animadversions on the part of his better half. She was engaged however. The socks had been heaped away into a wicker basket, and from some place near at hand had been produced a plain grey silk—"a best silk," which Mrs. Gear intended for Sunday wear, and which she was constructing herself for economy's sake. I have said that she was a woman with a keen eye, and something in the cut or set of Ellen's sleeve had arrested her attention, and led to inquiries, finally into a request that Ellen would just cut her out the pattern in the silk that was spread on the table.

So, whilst the women were busy over their dress-making, I broke suddenly through the ice. Not very gracefully, but with a crash, and a clumsy splash, that frightened Joseph considerably.

"Joseph, I want you, if you can manage it, to lend me twenty pounds for a few weeks. Only if it's handy, and the loan is not likely to inconvenience you," I added, with a stammer, as my brother turned pale, flushed red, and twitched nervously at the quill pen behind his ear.

They were busy over their silk patterns, at the table yonder, but Ellen's hand, that had taken up the scissors, paused for an instant, and for an instant, also, the eyes of Mrs. Gear flashed towards me and her husband, then flashed back again.

My brother was a long while pumping up his answer. He laboured very much with his breath, and lifted his hands mechanically up and down upon his knees, as though playing an imaginary harmonium. How I wished, the moment afterwards, that I had not asked him!—how I wished that I had struggled anyhow, or in any fashion, rather than have stooped to beg from him, and be shamed by his refusal!

"Why, you see, Canute, I am rather pressed just now—and there's bills to make up before the week runs out. I—I can't see very well how you're ever to pay me, supposing this new affair should prove to be a practical joke of somebody's.

Twenty pounds is a large sum to lend all at once—I don't believe I have it in the house."

"We haven't got it in the house," affirmed Mrs. Gear, with a decisive snap, that was intended to cut short the subject.

If she had kept silent, Nellie would have also remained on the neutral ground. But the presence of another on the field brought her to the rescue on the instant. The scissors rent through the silk with a recklessness which brought a scream of agony to the lips of her sister-in-law—there was an ominous divergence to the right, that would have horrified any matron making up her "Sunday's best."

"Canute don't mean without security, Joseph," cried Nellie, as the scissors were shaken somewhat indignantly from her hand to the floor.

"What security?—whose security?" inquired the brother, regarding dubiously the flushed face of his young sister.

"Valuables to the amount, if you are afraid to trust him," she said. "Here's the gold watch that was bought me before the family ruin—will you take that and the chain, in pledge, till the money is paid?"

Watch and chain were off her neck, and flung on the table, before the words were ended; the

works must have received no small shock from the sudden transition.

"Here's a ring my father gave me before he died, too, Joseph—will you have that also?"

She was making an effort to snatch that from her finger, when I called her to desist.

"It does not matter, Nellie,—the money is of no consequence, and can be obtained by fifty means less objectionable than this. Take up that watch and chain, Nellie—I won't have this."

Ellen obeyed me. In her excitement she had forgotten how much she was helping to pain me, as well as touch her eldest brother to the quick.

"I beg your pardon, Canute—I had forgotten you," she murmured.

"You are always so hasty, Ellen," said Mrs. Gear. "You do not make allowances for people being cautious in these times. And if we are pressed for money, and really haven't got the money, surely Canute and you have too much good sense to take offence?"

"No offence—no offence," I said, rising to my feet, very erect and dignified; "I would not take offence for many reasons—you have earned your money, and have a perfect right to stick to it, Jo.

Let us get home, Nellie—our mother will become nervous about us.”

Poor Joseph never looked so small—sitting there with his hands on his knees, heaped together, and confounded. He had nothing to say, nothing to urge—everything had happened so suddenly, and all his life he had been a man of method, taking things quietly, and in regular order.

Ellen had risen too, and was ready to depart with me.

“I may as well take this opportunity of bidding you good-bye, Joseph,” I said. “You’ll look after mother now and then, I hope?”

“Yes,” he muttered.

“I’m sorry that I put the question to you, and disturbed you so much,” said I. “Good-bye, Jo.”

I held out my hand towards him; he shook it languidly in his, and said “Good-bye” in a half-sulky, half-humiliated tone.

I was glad to escape with Ellen into the street, and relieve him from the embarrassment of my presence—glad to be walking with her, at a very rapid pace towards Blackfriars Bridge again.

We did not speak for several minutes, but

walked on in an excited manner. My sister Ellen was the first to break silence.

"Only twenty pounds, Can!—and to refuse you! Only twenty pounds to value your love and esteem by!"

"Hush, my girl! What does it matter?—what is the good of feeling indignant about it?"

"You were always too easy."

"The best way, my girl, to bear the disappointments of life."

"Aren't you angry, then?"

"A little angry in my heart, perhaps," I confessed; "or a little stuffy in the throat. Don't let us think anything more about a matter that is unpleasant. I was an ass to ask him, knowing what a careful man he was."

"How will you get the money now?"

"Leave it to me."

"No; I will leave nothing to you. I must help you in my way, Canute."

"Well, we will talk of the matter in a few moments, Nellie," I said; "meanwhile, let me take the opportunity—perhaps the only one I may have for a long, long while—of talking about you and your future in the days that are ahead of us."

I fancied that her hand began to tremble upon

my arm, and that her face was suddenly, sharply turned away from me.

"Nellie!"

"Canute!" she responded, looking towards me again, "leave me the direction of my own future—it is in my own hands, and beyond all interference."

"Is there anything connected with it that I may not know?"

She changed colour, I fancied; but the night was dark, and I might have been full of fancies at the time.

"What is connected with it, I scarcely know myself," she said, with a short laugh; "everything is very unreal and intangible with me. You would only laugh at my follies."

"No."

"When you come back again, it will be time enough to talk of this, if there be anything worth talking about," she added, quickly; "I don't know that there is—I don't believe that there is."

"This is a little incomprehensible, you will allow me to suggest," I remarked.

"Leave it so. Nothing can be half so incomprehensible to you as it is to me. After all, it is only a little misty—I am not unhappy, nay, I am

more confident of being happy than ever I was in my life. But oh! Canute, you are one less to love me after you are away in Cumberland!"

"Shall I love you the less for being apart from you?"

"I hope not—it is lonely in the world without you."

It was a cry that was akin to discontent, and I was sorry to hear it, though I professed to disregard it at the time, though I did not harass her by my persistency to discover that which she had said was intangible to her. Was she, after all, the least patient of the Gears?—had the change from affluence to respectable indigence affected her the most of all? Years ago, when she was a child, we had considered her a proud girl. Of late years, with nothing but her beauty to be proud of, we had not been struck with her peculiar trait of character. Had she outgrown it, or had it been a struggle to keep it hidden from her mother and me? She had worked bravely with the rest of us, and each took too earnestly a share in the common weal to note any particular change with our great change in life. She had been a girl who was ever jealous of affection—quick to love those who evinced any affection for her. Her words were

ringing in my ears still when we hastily resolved ourselves into a committee of ways and means, as to the best method of raising twenty pounds to start me decently in life.

CHAPTER III.

JOSEPH'S REPENTANCE.

THE next morning, in a few words, I told my mother of the result of my appeal to Joseph Gear. I treated the matter very carelessly, and my mother, anxious to throw the best light on the position of affairs, took up the cause with her characteristic readiness.

"Joseph has a very shrewd head, Canute, dear," said my mother; "he sees a flaw in your coming fortune somewhere, rely upon it."

"He has an excellent eye for flaws, mother."

"Ah! he always had," replied my mother, taking my response in the most literal manner; "that is what made him so useful in the business

when he was a lad. Did he give you any advice before you left him?"

"Oh! no," was my dry response to this.

"Dear, dear, dear—what will you do, then?"

"Do without it, in the best manner I can, mother. Shall I give you a sketch of my own ideas on the question?"

"Yes."

"I purpose writing to Mrs. Zitman for an advance of twenty pounds, if it be not convenient to forward my cheque for the whole sum due to me as top-boy of the class. If she decline—which I don't think she will—why, I shall begin to doubt if there's any good luck awaiting my arrival in Cumberland. That's plan No. 1. Plan No. 2 is to go to a loan society; plan No. 3 is to lay the case before my own employer, who was never a hard man; plan No. 4 is to raise the money by "spouting" the family plate; plan No. 5 is to buy a pocket pistol and take to the road—Waterloo Road, for instance."

"Good gracious, Canute, how is it possible for any one to follow you?"

"Think them all over, while I attempt to stir the iron-bound mould at the foot of your favourite willow, mother."

"I'll try, my son. Oh! dear, that will be your last piece of gardening for many a long day."

"Never mind. Think of the good luck ahead, and the great name I am beginning to build for myself. Think of that first, and then of my plans."

"Ye-es."

I went into the garden, or rather the back-yard, in which my mother's willow was making a strong effort to live under difficulties and chimney smoke. There was a story connected with that willow—it had been with us in sickness and in health; in the garden attached to our villa at Hornsey; in the garden of the little house we exchanged for the villa; in the back-yard of the premises wherein we at present drew breath. My sister Ellen had planted it on her eighth birthday, and it had struck root and flourished. My mother had taken quite a fancy to this tree—whilst she lived it should ever accompany her, for her little daughter's sake, she said. She was ever prone to be superstitious, and the grim fancy had once suggested itself that Ellen would not live to be a woman, therefore she had clung to that willow as to something which would keep Ellen's memory green when the dear girl was lost to her. Afterwards, when Ellen had grown up,

she treasured it for Ellen's sake, for past associations connected with it, for the sake of the remnant which it was of the better times from which we had drifted away. So the willow had borne three transplantings, the last a rough one, that had affected its constitution a little, aged it before its time, and made it a brown rather than a green willow—but still a willow, with life and strength left to struggle on. It had reached Kennington Road with some difficulty, and been passed over sundry back-yards and walls with greater difficulty still, amidst the applause of an army of boys, who had collected in a side street to superintend the process.

And under this willow I set to work with the spade at my last effort at gardening.

My work was not finished, when the yard door opened, and Joseph Gear made his appearance before me. He wore his usual blue dress coat and nankeen trousers—but the coat looked tighter and the trousers shorter than usual. They always did when he had something on his mind.

“Good morning, Canute.”

“Good morning, Joseph.”

He kept his right hand in his trousers pocket, and made no attempt to shake hands with me.

His keen grey eyes regarded very intently the work at which I was engaged.

"That's rather ridiculous employment, Canute," he remarked.

"Not the most profitable, perhaps; but the willow's looking brown, and it's the youngest of the family, and requires rather more attention."

My brother shrugged his shoulders; he had ever a distaste to poetical ideas.

"I've brought you twenty pounds, Canute," he said, after a long pause.

"Thank you."

"You don't seem very much surprised?"

I was surprised, but I concealed my feelings exceedingly well. Nay, more, I was rejoiced at this sign of brotherly feeling getting the better of a natural parsimony. It brought the tears into my eyes, and necessitated energetic digging to hide them. After all, he was a good fellow at heart, and valued me and my love at something more than the money I wanted.

"Surprised?—not much. After all, isn't it the most natural thing in the world—we two sons of a dead father, who loved us both with all his heart. I thought it might be a joke of yours last night."

"It wasn't a joke," he affirmed.

"Well, a leap at a resolution which you thought better of, remembering our relationship. We won't talk of the by-gones—I'll forget I called at Newton Street last night."

"Here's the money—what are you going to do with it?"

He drew his right hand, with some notes in it, for the first time from his pocket since he had left the City that morning.

"Take care of it, you may depend. Many thanks, Jo. Shall I give you an I.O.U. for the amount?"

"When we go in—if you are going in just now. I—I wouldn't keep digging at that ridiculous tree with twenty pounds in my pocket."

"We'll go in, Joseph."

"Excuse me, but don't you—don't you have buttons to those pockets of yours?"

"Never."

"Good Lord!"

"I don't think they have been in fashion since George the Third's time."

"Fashion!"

What a hearty contempt for the weakness of three-fourths of the human race was there expressed in my brother's reply!

We entered the parlour together, where I immediately produced my desk, and set about writing out an I.O.U. for twenty pounds. Joseph watched the process and fidgeted from one foot to another, and scratched one ear, behind which was certainly an old quill pen still.

"I—I don't think it's—it's—necessary, perhaps, between us two."

"It's more business-like."

"Yes, it's more business-like, certainly, but it's not of much consequence. If—if you never pay me, I'm quite prepared for the blow."

"There's the I.O.U. We must not forget the business-habits which our father instilled into both of us."

"Well, no."

He took my warrant for the money—thought I wrote a very bad hand—which there is not the slightest doubt of—placed the document very carefully in a pocket-book, which he had produced from some secret receptacle.

My mother sat watching all this with a pleased smile; Joseph's generosity had touched her heart. Joseph's business-like habits had always commanded her reverence.

"Where's Ellen this morning?" asked my brother.

"Out teaching, the dear girl," was my mother's response.

"She's getting a very bad temper—did *that* watch stop?"

"I really have forgotten to inquire," I said with a laugh.

"I never saw a watch slapped about so much in my life. By the way, mother, you need not let Mrs. Gear know that I have called here this morning. Women know so little about business."

We made the required promise.

"Strictly between ourselves—strictly between ourselves," he repeated twice. "I always hated a fuss about anything. When are you going to lock up your money?"

"Directly."

"In that rubbishing desk?"

"No, in a little strong-box I have upstairs."

"That's better hearing—good day."

"Good day. When I get my reward of merit from Mrs. Zitman, I shall forward you the twenty pounds at once."

"Thankee."

He went slowly out of the shop into the street.

In a moment afterwards, he turned into the shop again.

"What name did you say?"

"Zitman."

"And lives in Cumberland?"

"Yes, Nettlewood, Cumberland. You'll remember the address, if you have time to spare to drop me a line."

"Oh, yes!"

He went in a dream-like fashion out of the shop, to return a second time in a less automaton manner.

"If you should send the money back by letter, mind, only the halves, and wait till they're acknowledged. Good day."

He did not appear again, and, shortly afterwards, I repaired to my room to lock up my twenty pounds.

Poor Joseph's hair would have risen erect with horror had he seen the bottle of sherry which was bought on the Sunday evening to drink success to my new start in life. My mother even thought I was extravagant; we had had so little to do with wine of late years. Candidly, we had barely lived and kept out of debt.

Mother and Ellen drank my health, the tears of

the former running into her wine-glass and mingling with her Amontillado. This was her first parting with "her boy;" his first departure from the apron-strings, which boys, younger than I, so quickly learn to break away from. I felt like a child going away on a long journey, to a destination where there would be no mother to take care of me from that day forth. Possibly I was younger in thought than most men of my age, for I had thought so much of home, and those who had made it a dear home—despite all its poverty—to me. I had lived, and suffered, and struggled, and borne poverty, with these two—helping to keep the mother's heart light, at least. Thank God! I had had the power to do that, and, therefore, life had not been profitless with me. If she had not understood me, or my ambitions, that was a little side trouble which I thought little of, and which nobody guessed.

Ellen and I played our best characters that evening—we feigned the best of spirits, for the mother's sake. Ellen ventured into the regions of necromancy, and prophesied the life awaiting me—a large fortune by way of surveyor's commission, a handsome present from the lady requiring so palatial a residence, a young lady to fall in love

with me—a lady with property, to wind up the story in the most satisfactory manner.

“To fall in love with Canute! Oh! there’s plenty of time for him to get that nonsense into his head,” said my mother.

“To fall in love with me!” I echoed; “I who have engendered a half-stoop by bending so long over my desk, and am aging so fast; who have grey hairs already in my flaxen pow, and crow’s-feet at the corners of my sleepy eyes. It’s too late for any one to fall in love with me, at all events.”

“Wait till they understand you like I do, dear old Can,” cried Nellie.

I looked at myself in the dressing-glass that night, and wondered—not what any Cumberland young lady would think of me, but whether my appearance would be likely to impress my benefactress. I was tall and thin, and eight-and-twenty years of age. I hoped that I *did* look considerably older than that—I had always flattered myself that I looked double my years till then—or Mrs. Zitman would think me a very young architect, incapable of carrying out my plans to advantage; would perhaps lose confidence in me, and send me back discomfited to George Street. Confound it! how very young I looked that even-

ing! Was it the Amontillado sherry, which the publican at the corner had recommended me as a choice article, or the new thoughts, the new hopes, which had taken much care from my face. Too young and inexperienced, by all that was horrible, after all!

That same thought perplexed me when I started next day by an early train for Kendal, Westmoreland. My mother and sister saw the last of me, waved their hands towards me so long as I hung out of the third-class window, and kept the platform in sight. I know they prayed for my good fortune, my better days, and my safe journey in search of them, as heartily as I muttered my hope that God would watch over those two women whom I left behind to fight their battles alone.

So ends the still life of Canute Gear—the prologue to his story.

BOOK II.

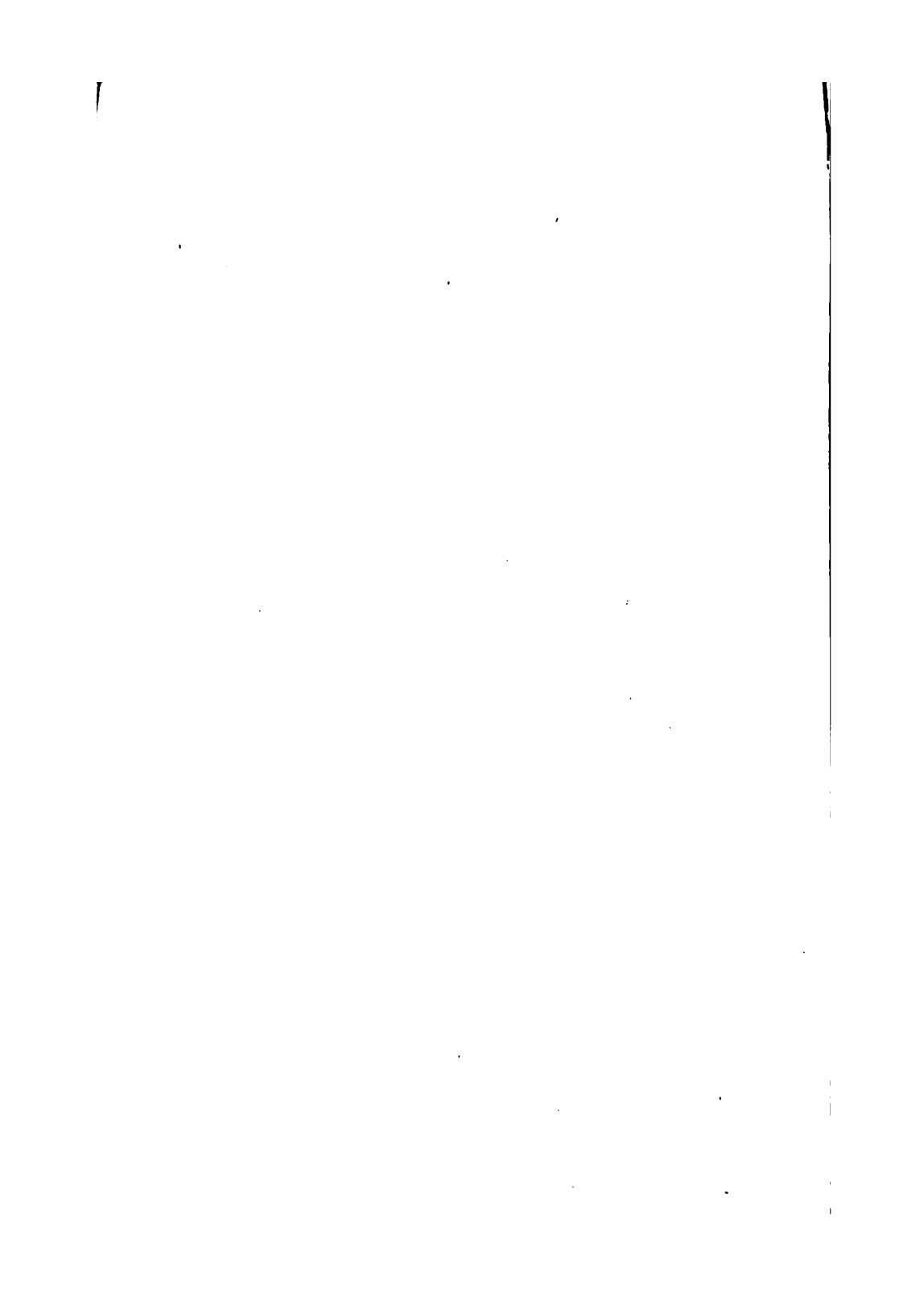
NETTLEWOOD FERRY.

"Whoever looks on life will see
How strangely mortals disagree."

CAWTHORN.

"Our faults are at the bottom of our pains ;
Error, in acts, or judgment, is the source
Of endless sighs : we sin, or we mistake."

YOUNG.



CHAPTER I.

"MAD WENFORD."

I HAD held a long council of war with myself previous to settling on my route to Nettlewood. There were two methods of arriving thither : one by proceeding by train direct to Penrith, and working my way to Nettlewood by coach or car ; the second by making for Bowness, Windermere, and proceeding, by a more picturesque if a little circuitous route, across country to my destination. My old master, who had been born in Westmoreland, strongly recommended the adoption of the latter plan ; thought even it was the nearer and better way, take it altogether.

"Make for Borrowdale, through Keswick," were

his injunctions, "then go on foot the rest of the way, or all the breath in your body will be bumped out of you in a Cumberland car. There's no getting at Nettlewood save by a mountain road, or by a long circuitous route through Portinscale and Braithwaite."

"Nettlewood is not a lively place, then?"

"Well, I can't say that it is."

"It must be a lovely place, though, and I, who have seen so little of the country, shall enjoy the change vastly."

"If you don't catch the horrors, Mr. Gear."

"Oh! I'm not subject to them."

"People accustomed to the turmoil of cities have been known to go melancholy-mad in mountain districts," he said, with a laugh.

I laughed also.

"I'll chance it, sir."

And I had chanced it, and was speeding on to the North of England in search of my new mistress.

The train left Euston Square at nine in the morning. Nothing worthy of remark occurred till four in the afternoon, when the train reached the noisy, smoky town of Preston, and a delay of twenty minutes, occasioned by a change of carriages,

&c., ensued. I had travelled in the most economical manner, in one of the usual third-class black holes placed at the disposal of the public whenever it undertakes long journeys, and was glad to escape, from my hard seat and the pressure of a crowded compartment, to the platform. Here I mingled with the crowd and fought with my contemporaries for a cup of 'coffee and a biscuit, wondering whether my racking head-ache would last much longer—and then what they were doing in Kennington Road, and finally, whether the tall, burly man with the sandy moustache was a lord, or a railway-director, that he received so much attention from everybody who recognized him.

This man began to arrest my attention more and more—to absorb it so utterly, that, had it not been for a friendly guard, I should have left my portmanteau in the waiting-room, and gone destitute and garmentless to Windermere. He was an extraordinary man, who attracted attention from more strangers than myself; he made himself a conspicuous character at the refreshment counter, and necessarily drew all eyes towards him. His height, in the first place, was remarkable, being an inch or two above six feet; his dress was remarkable for the scrupulous exactitude of its fit—it must have

been built on him, I thought—he wore lemon kid gloves, that fitted like his skin, and on the top of his light brown hair was perched a small, oddly-cut French cap, that gave quite a Punchinello character to his upper extremity. Above all, and before all, his manner was remarkable; he was paying particular attention to one of the young ladies at the refreshment counter, uttering his soft nothings, however, in a tone that might be heard half over the waiting-room.

I heard him say,

“If I make you an offer of my hand, Polly, will you accept it? Upon my soul, I’m tired enough of single life, and am looking round for a wife that can take care of me, and keep my feet from straying the wrong way into the Slough of—the Slough of——what the devil was the name of that slough, now?”

The name of the slough appeared to absorb all his attention an instant afterwards. He bit one finger-nail after another, and stood and swore volubly concerning the nomenclature, and stamped with his feet, and beat his gloved hand impatiently on the counter. I had finished my biscuit at his side, and an irresistible something led me to offer my assistance in relieving his excitement.

"Possibly you mean the Slough of Despond, sir."

"That's it, by —— I thank you, sir—I thank you."

He raised his odd cap, and saluted me with a gravity and stateliness that compelled me to raise my hat in return. As I walked away from the counter, he looked after me quite curiously.

It was at this juncture that the guard called my attention to the fact that I was leaving my portmanteau behind me. I thanked him and returned. The tall gentleman at the counter broke into a hoarse laugh as he became aware of my blunder.

"You might have made a mess of it there, sir."

"It would have been rather awkward, certainly."

"Devilish awkward. What bell's that?"

"The bell for the down-train," some one replied.

He uttered an oath, and strode away without so much as a farewell to the lady with whom he had been attempting a flirtation. At the door he snatched from the arm of a guard a long blue cloak lined with scarlet, dropped some money into the guard's hand, and marched down the platform.

The man followed him.

"Any particular carriage, sir?" touching his cap.

"Anything you like. Where are the dogs?"

"All right in the dog-box, sir."

"And my whip and gun?"

"We put them in the luggage van, sir. If you want them, sir, I can get them out in a minute, sir."

"Let them be where they are, and don't make yourself so damned officious. What's this?"

He stepped back from the first-class carriage, the door of which the guard had opened for him.

"I hate empty carriages—suppose I was to have a fit, or die in one. Don't you know by this time that I am partial to society?"

"This is the only first-class attached to this train, sir."

"Give me a third, then."

"What, sir?"

"A THIRD!" bawled the traveller. The man shrank as though he expected a buffet to follow the enunciation, and then led the way to a third-class compartment, to the very compartment wherein I was seated with three other occupants.

"We don't want the fool here," muttered an old man with white hair.

He was a Lancashire man, and evidently knew his customer.

"Who is he?" I ventured to inquire.

"Mr. Wenford of Nettlewood—Mad Wenford, some people call him."

"Good gracious, not mad!" ejaculated a nervous old lady who had travelled with me from Euston Square, nursing an immense bandbox all the way.

"About as mad as I am," grumbled the man.

Mr. Wenford came into the carriage the moment afterwards, the man who had expressed his discontent being the first to touch his hat obsequiously. Wenford only acknowledged the salutation by a rude stare, however, and took his place in a corner of the carriage facing me. The guard locked us in, and went away grinning from ear to ear. He joined another guard, and the two stood laughing and shrugging their shoulders until the train moved slowly away from the platform.

"There is nothing more dismal in life than travelling alone in a railway carriage," he said.

The remark was not addressed to me in particular, but he was facing me and looking hard at me, and I ventured a reply.

"It must be dull, if one has a long journey before him."

"Long or short, it doesn't matter much," he said abruptly.

"No—perhaps not."

He did not appear inclined to sustain a conversation; considering that he was a lover of society, he evinced some contempt for present company. He curled himself in his cloak, keeping the crimson side outwards, stretched forth his long legs, and relapsed into a comatose state, from which no one cared to arouse him.

I fancied that he had been drinking; there was a strong aroma of brandy when he first came in, and the suddenness with which he dropped into a disturbed kind of slumber seemed sure evidence of the validity of my suspicions. There was nothing before me but to keep my eyes on this man, or imitate his example by shutting them. I had read every line of the newspaper I had purchased at Euston Square; all the advertisements in Bradshaw I had learned by heart, the times of the departures and arrivals of trains were not particularly amusing, and here was a character that was a little out of the common way. I kept my eyes upon the sleeping man then; I was interested in him; he was living at Nettlewood, and in all probability was a man who would often cross my path. This

was a specimen of what Nettlewood could produce—a sample, perhaps, of the Nettlewood gentility. The specimen did not please me, though it interested me. Mr. Wenford was evidently not a lovable being; a man of eccentric habits, who paraded his eccentricities a little too ostentatiously, as though he were proud of them—a man, perhaps, who tried to be eccentric, and therefore a despicable character at the best.

He sat with his head thrown back, and his French cap nearly off his head. There was every opportunity of studying the man's personal appearance. His was a face that would have pleased some people, repelled others. Take it altogether, it was a good-looking face, though the eyes were too close together, and the lips coarse and sensual. It was a bold, fresh-coloured face—the forehead was massive and broad, but jutted unpleasantly forward—the nose was one of the most aristocratic hooks I had ever met with. He wore a moustache, too, that in my opinion at least did not conduce to any facial ornamentation; possibly his own opinion was different, for he had cultivated it to an extraordinary length—it was a sandy rope of some thickness, that trailed before him on to his waistcoat, like a Grand Turk's. To make up for this

display, he had abjured whiskers altogether, and wore a turn-down shirt collar, that displayed a red throat which would not have discredited a Cumberland bull's. So far, this was Mr. Wenford, of Nettlewood—Mad Wenford, as some people called him, it appeared. From the deference that was paid him, it was evident that he was a rich man, or a man at least who was lavish with his money. Doubtless, a great man at Nettlewood, where company was scarce and money scarcer amongst the poorer folk inhabiting the place. He had the manners of a man whose will was law in the mountain district where he lived; and he looked like a rich man dozing there before me. The gold chain that meandered over his well-fitting waistcoat was the thickest gold cable that I had ever seen. On the little finger of his left hand, from which he had drawn his lemon-kid glove, glittered a diamond as big as a hazel nut. There was a dog-whistle studded with rubies hanging by a hair chain, which had escaped from his vest as he slept.

Mr. Wenford woke twice before we reached Lancaster. The first time in a bad temper, wherein he cursed my portmanteau—which was under the seat—for being in the way of his long legs; the second time in an amiable mood, that demonstrated how

pleasant he could be when he had a mind that way.

He sat up, adjusted his Polichinello cap, stroked his moustaches, and then looked me full in the face.

"Are you for Carlisle, sir?"

"No, for Nettlewood, in Cumberland."

"Indeed?"

He elevated his eyebrows, and looked inquiringly at me. I anticipated that his next question would have been to have asked my business in that remote quarter of the Lake District; on the contrary, he steered clear of a direct question, with the tact of a well-bred man.

"It is a pretty spot; a trifle too remote and dull for most minds. You are perhaps of a studious turn?"

"Only a little inclined that way."

"You possess the thoughtful—even the abstracted—look of a man who makes a world within himself. You might be an author or a poet now?"

"Oh! no," I answered laughingly.

"Excuse the remark," he added, laughing too; "it was a rude question."

"On the contrary—quite a compliment."

"May I ask another rude question?"

"Certainly."

"How do you intend to proceed to Nettlewood? Have you sketched out any plan?"

"I have been recommended to take the steamer down the Windermere Lake to Ambleside."

"Yes," he broke in with.

"To proceed by car or coach to Keswick or Borrowdale, and walk the rest."

"Walk the rest?" he inquired.

"Is it so long a distance?"

"A long distance, and a dangerous way without a guide, if this misty weather continue—through the Black Gap, I suppose?"

"I don't know—I am a stranger to Cumberland."

"So it seems."

This was the first sign of his old abrupt demeanour—he was everything by turns and nothing long. When the train stopped at Lancaster, we both retained our seats; half of the people who caught sight of him at the carriage window appeared to know him, and to stare at his appearance in a third-class carriage. This seemed to amuse him; once he passed his jewelled hand over his face, to hide a peculiar smile, which he had not intended me to see.

"If you haven't a world within yourself, sir,"

he said, suddenly reverting to a past remark of his, "you will find Cumberland—especially Nettlewood, Cumberland—somewhat of a dreary vale of rest. One can't take comfort from inaction there, unless he be very weary, or very ignorant of the world."

"I am a lover of Nature."

"Nature palls after a while."

"I shall have plenty to do, I hope."

"Plenty to do!" he ejaculated; "by all that's holy, that makes a difference! You must be the architect who is coming to build a fine house by Nettlewood Lake for Mrs. Zitman."

I had no occasion to enwrap myself in any particular disguise, which in a day or two must inevitably fall; perhaps it was as well to let this grandee become aware that I was simply a poor architect and surveyor, going down to Nettlewood on business.

I replied that I was the architect for whom Mrs. Zitman had sent.

"I had expected to see an older man," he remarked; "as if any expectations ever framed could possibly approach the realization of one's thoughts. Your name is Gear?"

"Yes, sir."

"We were talking of you only a few days ago. Looking over your plans for the new building to enshrine a somewhat whimsical old lady."

"A very old lady?"

"As old as the Cumberland hills, I was going to add, and as full of changes as the weather which those hills seem to affect. Cross-grained and ill-tempered, as hard as granite and as forbidding as Hecate—upon my soul, sir, I do not envy you your task!"

This was a damper with a vengeance, but I put the best face on the shady side of the question. He was watching me somewhat keenly, as if to note the effect of his words, but my manner did not betray any surprise at his harsh criticism on a lady neighbour.

"I presume that she will not interfere with my superintendence of the building?"

"She will interfere with your design to begin with. She will turn it topsy-turvy, and suggest an alteration here, a modification there; she will want an extinguisher watch-tower at one end, from which she may see her enemies coming through the Black Gap, when the weather's fine enough, and a stone summer-house at the other to catch the sun's rays, and keep her withered old frame from shaking

itself to death with ague. It will be Zitman's house rather than Gear's."

"Upon my honour, you surprise me."

"Take my advice, and fly back to London on the wings of the wind, before trusting yourself with a she-wolf."

"I never turn back when I have once made up my mind."

"One of the dogged, go-ahead kind, then?"

"One of the patient, persevering order, my friends think me. I can't say—I'm no judge of character."

"Not of your own?"

"Well, I've never studied that."

"You're an odd fellow, by——"

He evidently expected me to laugh at this last assertion, backed as it was by one of his emphatic oaths, but the humour in the remark did not suggest itself, and I maintained a somewhat stolid demeanour. We reached Kendal Junction in a little under the hour after this; the train did not proceed direct to Windermere, and those who were bound for the lake-district had to bring their luggage and themselves on to the platform. Mr. Wenford was one of these, and he and his dogs, his gun and his whip, were under his sole protec-

tion again. He carried his gun on his shoulder, his whip in his hand, and his dogs—two ugly brown mastiffs, continually on the sniff at strange people's legs—wandered about the platform, and were lashed at very unnecessarily by their master.

Referring to my time-table, I found that there was no train for Bowness, Windermere, for an hour and a half—a time wherein I fancied some refreshment more solid than biscuits might be obtained for the inner man. A similar idea suggested itself at the same time to the tall gentleman who had travelled third-class with me from Preston.

"Are you going into the town, Mr. Gear?"

"For a short while. I have not dined yet."

"Nor I."

He went out of the station with me, flourishing and cracking his whip in the air and at the dogs.

"Do you know Kendal?" he inquired.

"I am a stranger to this part of the country."

"Let me lead the way to an hotel for you."

"I never patronize hotels," I replied.

I thought it as well to hazard that observation, lest Mr. Wenford should lead me into unlooked for expenses. It was as well that Mr. Wenford should understand at once that I was a poor man, to whom

his acquaintanceship would be a continual embarrassment. Besides, I did not like the gentleman, and felt that his absence would be a considerable relief to me.

I stopped at a small house in the beginning of the town. There was "Temperance Hotel" written over the door—this was evidently an establishment somewhat suited to my means.

Mr. Wenford stopped also, and looked up disparagingly at the premises. The two dogs sniffed their way into the passage and rooms opening therefrom. Presently there was a scream or two, a vociferous barking, then the rush of a cat out of the house, through Mr. Wenford's legs into the street, then the two dogs in full chase and horribly excited, then the landlady's son with a broomstick, finally the landlady herself trembling with fear and passion.

Wenford shouted to his dogs, and administered a few wild cuts at them; the landlady's son dropped his stick and touched his hat; the landlady, to whom Mr. Wenford was an unfamiliar object, however, attacked both of us, and gave us a piece of her mind on the instant.

"If we must keep two such ugly brutes, why didn't we keep them in proper order, and not let

them loose into other people's premises to frighten people to death ? The couple of us ought to be ashamed of ourselves, and we were no gentlemen, or we shouldn't stand staring there at her !"

Mr. Wenford bore with the reproof for a little while, and then exploded with a vehemence that frightened the landlady, the landlady's son, and his two dogs. The dogs crouched at their master's feet ; the landlady's son, evidently a nervous youth, stood with his back to the house and shivered ; the landlady turned pale, red, fairly collapsed, and went off into hysterics.

I need not set down here the full, true, and particular reply of Mr. Wenford to the hostess of the "Temperance Hotel ;" it was not characterized by any forbearance or chivalric courtesy to the softer sex ; it was the raving of a demented profligate. He shouted at the top of his voice, he swore the most frightful oaths at her, her cat, her habitation, and her interference ; he cursed her and Kendal, and temperance hotels for ever and ever ; he told her that she was drunk and mad, or she would have known to whom she was speaking ; he vowed the most frightful vengeance on her, her heirs, successors, and assigns, for the gross indignity that had been proffered him ; he accompanied every

sentence with a sharp crack of his whip, that kept the dogs at his feet, shaking in every muscle with nervous excitement.

I gave up all hopes of dining at Kendal; I was glad to escape from Mr. Wenford, and leave him to bully the landlady to his heart's content; unobserved by that gentleman, I wended my way back to the railway station, found my portman-teau still in the corner where I had left it, took up my position in the little waiting-room, and composed myself to wait patiently for the coming train to Windermere.

It was not till the train had arrived that Mr. Wenford made his appearance, whistling an opera air of a most pathetic description. He was in the best of spirits, and looked the picture of amiability. He addressed himself familiarly to the railway guards—who appeared charmed by his condescension—he even thanked them for taking the dogs, the gun, and the whip off his hands once more. He did not look round for me, but stepped at once into a first-class carriage, and gave the guard half-a-crown to keep it locked against all intruders—"he hated society," I heard him say before the key turned on him.

At the Windermere station I lost sight of him

immediately. There were omnibuses from the various hotels at Bowness waiting to convey passengers to the village; there were two saddle horses being held by a groom; there was a little crowd of touters to fight my way through into the roadway.

"How far do you reckon it to Bowness, lad?" I asked of a shock-headed youth who was standing with his hands in his pockets admiring the saddle horses.

"About a moile, or a moile and a arf."

"Thank you."

"Shall I carry your portmantoo, sir?"

"Catch hold."

I was glad to be rid of my luggage, and to find a guide to Bowness—ininitely glad to get rid of Mr. Wenford, and obtain a chance of stretching my legs, so horribly cramped with that long journey. The stars were out in Westmoreland; there was a slight wind rustling the trees; the air felt fresh and fragrant to my heated senses—my head-ache was improving every instant. My guide and I went on down the road; the omnibuses rattled by us towards Bowness; two tourists who had come by the same train with me, and were in

a greater hurry than I, tramped by me; presently we had the dark road all to ourselves.

Close upon Bowness, two horsemen, followed by two dogs, dashed past me and the boy. The taller one looked down as he galloped by.

"Good night, Mr. Gear."

"Good night, sir."

"Compliments to all good friends at Nettlewood House. Don't forget them!"

He and his groom, who were riding side by side, were far ahead of me the moment afterwards.

That was not the last I saw of him, however. There was no disguising that stalwart form, and that ridiculous cap he poised on the top of his head.

Late that night, after I had dined at my inn—try the inns of Bowness, reader, the good old-fashioned inns of that Westmoreland village, in preference to the modern hotels there—I strolled forth down the sloping roads to the banks of the immortal lake. I was restless and excited, and could not settle down that evening; Mr. Wenford, or Mr. Wenford's remarks, had disturbed the even tenor of my way.

He had spoken of a whimsical, even a hard

taskmistress—he had advocated my flying back to London in preference to continuing my journey. The uncertainty of that which was before me seemed already to cast a shadow on the track I was pursuing. I was tired, but the thoughts of seeking my bedchamber were distasteful to me; the moon had risen since my late dinner, and I sallied forth in search of the picturesque.

The picturesque did not divert my mind much that night—the shadow was too dark and impenetrable before me; the friends I had left in London seemed very far away, and troubled me more than there was any necessity for. The glassy lake so still before me, the islands dotting it, the mountains far beyond them, looking so dim and misty in the full moonlight of that night, did not lead my thoughts astray. I felt the influence of the scene, its novelty, its bewildering beauty in itself; but I felt no pleasure, no sense of calmness, no gratification at the great change that had befallen me.

Twelve or thirteen hours ago in the London streets; now in the garden of paradise. From London, where it had been a struggle to live and keep home together, to this place, where, in all

probability, better fortune awaited me, and yet so disturbed, so dissatisfied !

By the lake's margin, and in the neighbourhood of Bowness used to be, possibly are now, a few fixed seats for the accommodation of the many visitors to this delightful spot. They were vacant this evening, with one exception. Two men sat side by side with their faces to the lake, and their backs to the road along which I was sauntering. They were talking very earnestly together, and did not turn as I passed them. One of the speakers was Mr. Wenford, his figure was unmistakable ; the other was evidently a younger man, of slighter build. Both were smoking cigars.

"I don't admire your style of going to work," I heard the younger say.

"I have puzzled him, as I puzzle everybody," was the conceited answer.

"Well, what do you think of him?" the younger speaker asked, in a somewhat impatient tone.

"That he will be a trouble to us. That he's dangerous."

I passed on. I went on down a shady road that diverged a little from the lake. I might have been walking in a dream for the reality of

anything around me. Who would be a trouble?—
who was dangerous?

I found my way back to Bowness by another road on my left. I did not cross his path again that night. I had a dread of meeting him.

By any moral deduction whatever, was it possible to believe that Wenford and his companion had been speaking of me? I thought not—after a hard struggle with a foolish suspicion, I thought *that* down at least. No one could believe that trouble was to follow my arrival, or that there was danger keeping step with ME!

CHAPTER II.

THE BLACK GAP.

FROM the buxom landlady of the inn I obtained, next morning, some further information as to roads and Cumberland travelling, which decided my future course for good.

By steam-boat down the lake to Ambleside—by coach from Ambleside to Keswick, where I could leave my portmanteau to be sent on to Nettlewood by any means available, and make my own way through Borrowdale to the bridle road and mountain path which led to Mrs. Zitman's house. By these means I should see a great deal of the landscape, test my pedestrian powers, which had been rusting from disuse, reach by the even-

ing my point of destination. I had no fear of losing my way, thanks to a pocket map that had been purchased, trade price, before I left Euston Square yesterday. Most of my morbid thoughts, I found, had vanished by the morning; I had slept off my fatigue, and the world was not so full of tortuous roads, ending in mystery. Somehow, yesterday, I had engendered round me a halo of romance—I who had always laughed at people's romantic feelings, and professed to think them distorted children of vain folks' affectation. Now I was matter-of-fact and practical again—I was in the lake district on business—I had only met with a half-drunken bully, whose manners and customs were not of the slightest consideration to me.

I started at an early hour. The first steam-boat on the lake that morning took me and a few travellers to Ambleside. The weather was propitious, though a man on board the boat prophesied rain and wind rather vainly, I thought; the sun was shining in a cloudless sky—the mountains beyond were full of green and purple shadows.

I enjoyed the country that morning; it was a new life for me, in which I could luxuriate. A fair morning, a glorious landscape, every bend of

the lake bringing forth fresh scenes, mountain after mountain range opening on my view, life and light all dissipating the morbid dreaming that had troubled me a short while since. I was in good time for the coach to Keswick; outside that vehicle I took a further lease of life's enjoyment. I was in Keswick before twelve o'clock; I spent a quarter of an hour arranging for the transmission of my portmanteau thence to Nettlewood, and then I set forth, fortified for a true pedestrian scramble by a stout walking-cane and a pocket map. I was a vain man, confident in my own resources to find my way, and drop into Nettlewood Vale from the mountain path which was delineated in my map by a dotted line—evidently a path that nobody could miss.

I caught myself humming a favourite song of Ellen's by Derwentwater Lake—my spirits had risen so beneath the influence of fine weather and fair scenery. Given a moderate income, a few dear friends, an occupation not too often intruded upon by the whims of patrons and patronesses, and life at Nettlewood would be something enviable in contrast to the old life at Kennington. I had begun already to build my castles in the air; I was to lay the corner-stone of my fortune here; to

take a cottage here for mother and Ellen, in the good time lying so short a distance from the present. If the erection of this mansion took six months, nine months, twelve months, and there was a chance of other work to follow this, why, it would cost very little to have mother and sister at my side again. There was something objectionable in the idea of those two slaving out their souls in London streets, whilst I revelled in God's sunlight, and grew strong and brave in a world of which I had scarcely dreamed.

I marched on, swinging my stick, singing Ellen's song, or thinking of the better days—varying both now and then by a laugh at the peculiarities of Mad Wenford, the man who had been my *bête noire* only a few hours ago.

Here were Derwentwater and Lowdore; here were the famed Lowdore Falls, which I went a little out of my way to see. Why should I not enjoy myself with so many hours before me? Tomorrow Mrs. Zitman would be confronting me, and, if Wenford spoke truth, worrying me. Tush! why should I care for worry?—what was Mr. Wenford's definition of worry? Was he not a man whose temper a straw would ruffle, and was not I a patient, uncomplaining mortal? There was a

difference in our ideas of things. I felt that, with my premium in my pocket, I could endure a deal of harass for the money. Certainly it would vex me if Mrs. Zitman interfered too much with my plans—but I had a hope that my powers of elocution would shake the validity of her suggestions. I should like the new Nettlewood house built in its entirety—"my house," as I had planned it when the advertisement first set me struggling for the prize. In Borrowdale Vale, and walking a good four miles an hour, not exciting myself by over-fatigue, but pushing on at a fair pace, and keeping my eyes open as to the beauty of the views around me. To hasten on my story, and not grow as prolix as a guide-book, finally, at four in the afternoon beyond the Vale, and at the entrance to the Black Gap. I found the spot without any difficulty; across a damp meadow or two towards a pile of hills in the corner—the map was one that could be trusted, or I was more than ordinarily clear-sighted. There was the Black Gap, a lone hill between two taller ones—there went the path, such as it was, over the first green slope.

There was a cottage at the foot of the hill, and a boy swinging himself on a rickety gate. For

mere ceremony's sake, I pointed with my stick to the path ahead of me.

"Black Gap?" I inquired.

"E'es."

"How far to Nettlewood?"

"Doan't knoa."

An old woman, awakened to life by my shouting, made her appearance at the doorway, and stood shading her eyes with her hand and looking towards me.

I repeated the latter inquiry to the ancient dame.

"Seven miles or eight, sir, if you know your way."

"It's easy to find, I should think."

"I never found any difficulty myself. It's easy on a fine day, sir."

"That is the Gap, I suppose?"

"That is the White Gap, leading to the Black Gap—straight as you can go, sir. There's a gentleman ahead of you, if you can overtake him."

"Thank you."

I started up the path, a stony sheep-track, somewhat surprised to find the grass so moist in these parts. There must have been rain here

within the last two hours, I fancied. I made no effort to overtake the "gentleman ahead;" I preferred my own company, my own quiet enjoyment of all that was passing around me. I had walked ten miles at least, without experiencing the least fatigue; I was good for the other seven or eight, as though I had just begun my morning's walk. The evenings were light till half-past eight o'clock; I should be in Nettlewood long before the daylight flitted away behind the range of mountains. I scaled the first hill, and found another beyond it, shut in, as it were, between two taller hills or mountains—this was the White Gap, evidently. The path became rather less distinct; once or twice ended abruptly in grass, and began again fifty yards in advance. It was a long, uphill progress to the top, but I was rewarded by looking back at the valley beyond, and the fair expanse of landscape stretching out before me. The cottage at which I had inquired was a speck in the vale below; there was a stiff breeze on the high land whereon I stood and looked about me—there were some flying clouds coming up over the third hill, which had appeared before me when the second was surmounted.

The flying clouds trooped over the hill with re-

markable celerity ; when I set my face towards the old route, they seemed coming down the hill to meet me, and hiding its summit in a vale of mist. Then, presto ! there was a full charge at me ; the mist and clouds were driven on me by the wind, the rain came pattering down in heavy drops, the path became dim and indistinct, then vanished altogether—I was shut in on the mountain-path, and getting wet through rapidly.

I imagined that the mist would soon clear off if the wind continued, so I plodded along carelessly, and was rewarded for my perseverance by a break of sunshine—finally, by the hill-top becoming once again perceptible. I set forth, then, at a brisker pace ; the advantages of society began to suggest themselves ; I had not so much confidence in my own powers of perspicacity. If I could overtake the stranger journeying in the same direction as myself, so much the better. The path was very faintly traced now—presently I felt convinced it would soon cease altogether.

The third hill, a sudden dip in the land almost to a valley, and then a fourth hill looking unpleasantly grim and stony. Save the sighing of the wind between the hills—a curious murmur, as of some one in pain, it seemed—all still and solemn

and depressing, and no one ahead of me yet. Toiling up the fourth hill, whereon, to my satisfaction, the path appeared more strongly marked, and then met again by mist and rain and heavy banks of cloud—suddenly blinded for a while by the flash of lightning which darted past me, and lit up the mountains. When the thunder followed this, and seemed leaping from one hill to another, and rolling itself down them, I sat down, under cover of a huge friendly boulder, and began to shiver. Kennington Road appeared very lovely in the distance then, and Cumberland scenery fell to a discount. Nothing like the bustling London streets, where there was ever life, and comfortable faces, and one could ask the way, and find it too!

The rain continued, and I was getting wet through wondrously fast; I was inclined to collapse with cold and inaction—I had heard of such cases—might be death. On to Nettlewood with a dash, irrespective of the storm—on over the hill, fighting my way to a friendly shelter. The rain kept on, but the storm abated somewhat; the sky became less dense, and I could still keep the path in sight. The path had transformed itself into a rivulet by this time, and it was not difficult to follow if I kept ankle-deep in water.

The fourth hill was ascended and descended ; half-way down I caught sight of a green valley beneath, with a river meandering through its midst. Three-quarters of the descent, and I became aware of some one toiling up the path to meet me. It was a pleasant sight to encounter a human being then, and I hastened downwards in better spirits. Five minutes afterwards I recognized Mr. Wenford.

"Go back ! go back !" he shouted when within hearing distance, "the river is too deep to ford, and there are fifty thousand devils in the Black Gap yonder. This is a cursed fool's trick of yours and mine."

When we were face to face I said,

"I was not aware that you intended to pursue this route."

"Your confounded nonsense put it in my head. I was tired of horse-riding, and inclined to try the Gaps, for the first time in my life. I have tried everything, and the idea rather pleased me. Turn back, man, and put your best leg foremost before the storm gathers again."

"How many miles is it to Nettlewood by the Black Gap, sir ?"

"Three"

"And I have come four. It would be folly to turn back."

"And madness to go on."

"I shall go on."

"The devil you will!"

He looked at me with quite an admiring glance; my resolution to proceed appeared to excite him.

"You don't look made to stand against much fatigue—have you the courage to try the Black Gap in this weather?"

"I must get on. It's not a question of courage. I pledged my word to see Mrs. Zitman early to-morrow morning."

"Oh! you're a man of your word," he said, with a sneer.

"I hope so."

"And you won't turn back?"

"No."

"Then I'll go with you. If any man can struggle on to Nettlewood, I can. And it's not pleasant to be alone in the mountains. Come on, Mr. Gear—this is a match of strength between you and me. No mercy to the man who drops dead-beat on the road."

He turned, and went on down the hill-side, I

following him. Slipping at every step, we found ourselves at last in the valley, and by the side of the rushing river, a river of some sixteen or twenty feet across, it proved to be when I was standing by its margin, watching its rapid current and its fretful clash over the great stones with which it was studded.

"This balked me," said Wenford; "I did not care to cross and get wet to my waist without an admiring audience—it was awfully slow work here alone. But now, forward!"

He coolly waded into the water, without exercising much judgment of selection, and fought his way across. Time was everything, and I imitated his example at once, seeking the assistance of a stepping-stone here and there, and not presenting on the opposite side an object quite so deplorable as himself.

A steady rain was falling now, the thunder was muttering itself away amongst the distant hills, but the daylight was becoming fainter every instant.

"There is the Black Gap," said Wenford, with a grim smile, pointing to a dark mass of mountains in advance of us.

"Do you see the path?"

"Devil a bit of path will there be found up there. It's as straight as you can go, and if you don't go straight it's over the fells to the bottom, or ten miles out of your way, as the case may be. At all events, it's up there, I believe. I begin to like this style of thing now, Mr Gear."

"Do you?"

"I wish the lightning would come back to enhance the effect, or the night suddenly fall upon us, and wrap us in it. There would be something more to boast of, then."

"I'm satisfied with the present gloomy state of things."

We were ascending the Gap, and had soon but little breath left to spare in conversation. The mountain was rugged and steep, and it became sheer climbing after a while. Presently Mr. Wenford fell, and gathered himself up with an oath, and looked round to see if I were going to fall also. I disappointed him at this juncture, but a hundred yards further on I came heavily on my chest, and Wenford took that opportunity to laugh long and heartily.

Still we toiled and struggled forwards, the rain coming down more steadily, and the light in the west becoming fainter every instant. Wenford

would have part of his unnatural wish—we should have the night upon us in the Black Gap, at all events.

“Are you wet through, Gear?” he called over.

“Oh! yes—some time ago.”

“What do you think of the Cumberland Fells?”

“Pleasant places after dark, and in damp weather. How far do you think we are from Nettlewood now?”

“I don’t know—I don’t care,” he shouted back at me.

This was a singular man, at all events; he had a fair claim to being considered Mad Wenford, I allowed. Far from a pleasant companion, as he had proved yesterday, he was infinitely less to be preferred that day. Deliberating on the matter, as I toiled and stumbled along, I arrived at the conclusion that after all I should have preferred his room to his company, even in the chaotic wilderness of rock-work wherein I groped my way.

There was a rivalry between our powers of endurance, and the man’s manner secretly began to aggravate me. He was a boaster and a braggart, I felt assured; he was proud of his animal

strength, and the opportunity of testing it, to my disadvantage—my intention to proceed had annoyed him, and I felt in my heart that he had only exposed himself to this unnecessary fatigue in order that he might have a chance to laugh at my discomfiture. And until I dropped, I thought, I would struggle on with him, and prove myself as good a man. I was half dead with fatigue by that time, but my courage was high still. I toiled on and asked no questions, but followed in his wake, wondering when the eternal mountain ascent would be over, and secretly anathematizing it, and the blinding rain that rendered all so indistinct.

The night settled at last amongst the fells—in the darkness I could scarcely see him—a little way ahead I could hear him stumbling along.

"I don't know where we are," he called out once; "I think we have lost our way."

My heart sunk awfully, but I answered :

"Never mind ; we must get to the top if we keep on."

"And get to the bottom, too, if we don't look devilish sharp," he muttered.

Losing sight of him so often, I did not study his route so much, but toiled upwards on my

own account. After a while I lost him altogether, and fancied that during the rest of the way I should be left to my own resources, when he turned up again suddenly, some twenty feet below me.

"Hollo! are you ahead there, Gear?"

"Yes."

"I have had another fall, and have been admiring the landscape on my back for a minute or two. I'd give something for some brandy here."

I had too little breath to waste, and merely answered him by a monosyllabic grunt. I felt that if we had come the wrong way, I must drop shortly, and let him go by me, merciless and cruel, as I felt he would be. We were in a dense vapour now, and the ground beneath our feet rose less precipitous—finally became level.

I paused, and waited for him to join me.

"We are at the top!" I panted.

He stood by the side of me, and struggled with his breath for a moment. I envied him the facility with which he came round.

"Yes, we are at the top," he said; "which way?"

"Downwards," I answered.

"*Facile est, &c.*—do you agree with me?"

"Hardly."

"Let me think now," said he; "I have come as far as here, Nettlewood way, with my gun—I may help you now, if you'll thank me for it."

"Certainly I will."

"You have shown yourself a plucky fellow, and I like men of pluck, all the world over. I thought you a fool yesterday."

"Thank you for your good opinion."

"And I hate fools, as fools hate me. But I like a strong man, with the power in himself to brave difficulties—fight his way through them, and go on unerringly, and in the face of danger, to the object in view far away there. That's the man I like, and will call friend, be he a poor devil of an architect, or not. Gear," suddenly clapping his heavy hand on my shoulder, "I call you my friend, for your courage. There are not two other men living but ourselves who would have attempted the Black Gap to-night. They won't believe in Nettlewood that we have ever done it—damn their incredulity!"

"But we haven't done it yet."

"I think we are right enough. Let us sit down here and listen."

"Listen for what?"

"For the Ferry bell. Those who come by the Black Gap, or the bridle road that runs by the Lake, must pull the bell hanging by the post, this side of the water. It must be past eight, and there are miners and quarrymen reaching their journey's end now."

He sat down composedly, and I was glad to imitate his example, miserable as was our position, and uncongenial as was the place we had chosen.

"Here!" he said, a moment afterwards, and thrust a brandy-flask into my hand.

I took it with an ejaculation of surprise. He gave vent to one of his boisterous laughs at my astonishment.

"I have been testing the thorough-bred to the utmost," he said, "and he's fought his way in first-rate style. Backed by brandy taken on the sly, I could scarcely keep your match. Drink, man!"

Under any other circumstances I might have felt inclined to hurl the brandy-flask at him, but there was the iciness of death in my veins, and in the fire-water was life and animation, which I dared not refuse. I drank a part of the brandy, and felt ready to proceed again.

"Keep still and listen," he said, when I expressed a wish to renew our journey.

He had hardly spoken when the faint tingle of a bell was borne to our ears. Wenford sprang to his feet with a shout.

"We're right! Turn to the left, and then go downwards gently. Hip! hip! hurrah! for Nettlewood!"

He led the way now, and I followed close at his heels. He knew the route perfectly, as though it were broad daylight, and the weather were fine. We commenced a long wearisome descent, which seemed as though it would never end.

"You and I were sitting on the brink of a precipice overhanging Nettlewood a moment since," he said; "half a mile only to the bottom that way—two miles this."

"Two miles now!" I exclaimed.

He did not heed my inquiry.

"Fancy if I had owed you a grudge, now, what a clean thrust to the bottom it might have been, and never a soul the wiser. A Cumberland jury bringing in a verdict of 'Accidental Death, caused by foolhardiness in attempting the Black Gap in a storm.' I alone in the secret of your hasty exit from all the troubles of this life."

"It's a grim thought, Mr. Wenford."

"Ay!—it is."

We descended together at a rapid pace. I could trace the path for several feet in advance in a darkness less intense. We went on manfully now; in half-an-hour's time or less we were on level ground again. A piece of water, swollen like that solitary stream we had crossed between the Gaps, spread out before us on our left. Across it I fancied I could detect a dark sweep of meadow land, a house-roof here and there, a fleck or two of fire from cottage windows.

Wenford approached a tall white post, erected by the river's side. A rope was attached to it, and he pulled vigorously, making the bell above our heads jar discordantly in the night air.

"This is Nettlewood Ferry, Mr. Gear," he said.

CHAPTER III.

LETTY RAY.

It was cold work standing in our wet garments, with the wind and rain swooping at us; Mr. Wenford stamped about the wet grass, and cursed the tardy progress of the boat across the stream.

"I'll give them Wenford's ring," he said at last, and proceeded to keep up one continued discordant clanging of the bell above our heads until the keel of the ferryman's boat grated on the pebbly strand.

"Good day t'ye, Mr. Wenford," said the man in the boat.

"You didn't expect to ferry Mad Wenford over to-night, Jabez."

"Noa, noa."

"This gentleman and I have come by way of the Black Gap."

"Noa?" said the man in inquiring astonishment.

"Didn't I tell you," turning to me, "that they wouldn't believe us in these parts? A set of idiots, with heads three times as thick as ever baboons were endowed with!"

He sprang into the boat, and I imitated his example. We had put off from the land when a female figure came hurrying to the water's brink.

"Stay a moment, Jabez."

"Stay for no one, man! We shall die with cold!" cried Wenford.

But Jabez, like a man of business who did not care to be too often at ferry work that particular evening, put back, and I stood up in the boat with my hand extended to assist the female to enter. She had passed me and Wenford, and was sitting at the back of Jabez, before my courtesy was of any avail.

Wenford looked hard at her, shaded his eyes with his hand, and attempted to more accurately define the face and figure of the woman shrouded in her thick plaid shawl.

"Letty Ray," he said at last.

"Well?" was the short response.

"You haven't been following us through the Black Gap, you jade?"

"I'm not a mad-woman."

"Where have you been on a night like this, I wonder?"

"Wonder on, Mr. Wenford," was the reply.

"Sweethearting, for a five-pound note. There is nothing on earth, or under the earth, to keep you women from your lovers."

"But are there any lovers bold enough to venture forth to meet their women? You men are such cowards."

"No one ever called Ned Wenford a coward," he said quickly.

The girl laughed in rather an irritating manner. Wenford sat and scowled at the shawled figure before him. I anticipated one of those volleys of abuse in which he had heretofore distinguished himself, but was happily disappointed for the nonce.

"You and I never did run our horses' heads together comfortably, Letty. When you were not teasing me, I was teasing you. Heavens! do you remember the last quarrel we had in the Spring?"

"I did not quarrel," was the reply.

"Oh! no—you only made me a little nervous about my life for the rest of the day. Well, Letty, where *have* you been to-night?"

"Ask no questions, and you'll hear no——"

"Lies," added he, "right you are, my fair maid of the ferry. How's the old woman?"

"Who?"

"The old woman — mater-familias, with the death's head and cross-bones. Ugh! but she's an ogress!"

"Stop there!—stop that!" cried the girl in an excited manner.

It was Wenford's turn to aggravate, and he began at once. He never did like that old woman, a cross-grained, ill-tempered being whom he hated like poison, and who hated him, as she did all humanity. He could wager fifty pounds that she was scouring the elements cross-legged on a broomstick to-night—this was a night congenial to evil spirits. The listener for whom these remarks were particularly intended, had recovered her composure, however. I saw that she shrugged her shoulders once under the shawl, and resigned herself to the infliction—such as it was; I believe she even forgot all about it and him, for when the boat reached

the other side, by the light glimmering through the casement of a house contiguous to the water's edge, I could see that there was a very thoughtful face—a very handsome face, too—visible under the heavy folds which draped it.

We paid our fare to the man Jabez, and went at once into the house—the Ferry Inn at Nettletwood.

Mr. Wenford stamped his way along a tiled passage towards a large, low-ceilinged room, half parlour, half kitchen, at the extremity, shouting for Mrs. Ray at every step. Mrs. Ray, however, did not condescend to respond, although she was found, sitting in a stiff, straight-backed chair before the fire, spreading two thin hands before the blaze.

She looked round as we entered, and Wenford's previous allusions to that lady forcibly recurred to me. Although not "materfamilias with the death's head and cross-bones," hers was a ghastly face enough. A cold, white face, whereon the cheek-bones were unnaturally prominent, and the thin nose uncommonly like an eagle's beak. An unhealthy face—the face of a woman who had suffered much pain, and experienced much sickness for many years—a woman more thin, and angular, and fragile, I had

never seen begging for bread in London streets.

"You're making noise enough to-night, Mr. Wenford," she said quietly.

"Offer prayers to-night, old woman, that there's enough breath left in me to make a noise with. I've come over the Black Gap in the storm."

"It must have been bad walking," quietly observed the old lady.

"It was nearly bad dying, mother Ray," he affirmed with an oath; "these people," turning to me, "don't think much of our adventures—curse their impudence! Where's Letty gone?"

"Here she is—what do you want with her?"

Letty Ray had entered the room whilst he was speaking; instinctively I glanced towards her. A girl of twenty years of age apparently—a dark girl, with a mass of raven hair gathered loosely round her head. To many tastes, a girl with considerable pretension to beauty, having an olive skin, a rich colour on her cheeks, large dark eyes full of fire, a well-formed nose and mouth, a well-made, if somewhat slight figure. For one occupying so low a position, evidently a proud girl, and carrying her head on her shoulders like a duchess. There was a contemptuous expression on her countenance, which possibly gave me that impression at the time—

the appearance of Mr. Wenford in her mother's house certainly not conducing to any extra amiability just then. She was plainly dressed—poorly clad it might be said without much exaggeration—wearing on her feet the thick-soled Cumberland boots made to stand all weathers. But she moved lightly enough in these heavy appendages, and there was a singular grace in her movements which attracted immediate attention. If she were not a perfect beauty, she was at least a girl about whom it struck you at once that there was a something remarkable. She crossed to the side of the fire, and took up her position with one hand upon the high mantelpiece, looking, as she stood there with that defiant, disdainful expression, the defender of her mother against the coarse and ungallant attacks of Mr. Wenford.

"I want brandy," said Wenford, in answer to her former inquiry, "or anything to keep my marrow from freezing."

"And your friend?"

"Brandy too, to be sure. Look sharp, girl, look sharp! Don't stand there sneering at us, as if we weren't worthy of being attended upon, or spoken a civil word to."

Letty left the room for the requisite stimulant,

and Mr. Wenford drew a high stool towards the fire, taking up his position in amiable conjunction to the old lady.

"Your daughter is too lofty for her station, Mrs. Ray," he said; "what's the matter with her?"

"I don't know. I've too many ailments of my own to be a-studying *her* whims," was the selfish response.

"She's dreaming of the fortune that will never come to her, mother," he said.

The old woman clasped her thin hands together, and her white face assumed a look of intense interest.

"I don't know that—I don't know that!"

"Do you think there's madness in the people at Nettlewood House?"

"I know what I think, bully Wenford."

"Hollo! that's an ugly name, that my godfathers and godmothers never gave me," he cried; "where did you pick that up?"

"I have heard it scores of times—ever since you horsewhipped the wrong man for frightening your mare."

"They're cursedly free about here—I shall have to stop this."

The old lady smiled placidly at the fire, and

began to warm her hands again; the look of interest on that parchment countenance died out completely.

"You know what you think, mother Ray, do you?" he said, reverting to her former remark; "do you know what I think?"

"No."

"That you'll die in poverty, and that I and other respectable ratepayers will be at the expense of your funeral."

Mrs. Ray laughed at this—it was an unearthly croak of satisfaction, for which I could scarcely account.

"People are wise now-a-days, and don't marry for love," he said; "*some people*, I know, never intend to marry again, Mrs. Ray."

"You're a mocking devil," cried the woman, with a sudden snarl; "why do you come here to taunt an old sick woman? If it's the truth—which it may be, but which can't be helped—why do you come here to hiss it at me, and remind me of all which beggared me and mine?"

"Let him taunt, mother," said the voice of Letty behind us, "his has been a life of reviling—can we expect him to spare *us*? Let him and his friend drink their brandy and begone—their

custom is not wanted, when an insult is brought with it—the Ferry Inn will exist without their patronage.”

“Bravo, Letty, bravo! Here’s your very good health, my dear. Mrs. Ray,” with a meaning nod in her direction, “*good fortune* to you.”

“Ugh!” was the only response.

I had been waiting my time to defend myself; I broke in here.

“Pray acquit me, Miss Ray, of any intention to insult you or your mother. I am a stranger to all in the house—to all in Cumberland. Seeing that this is the first time that I have opened my lips, I trust I may be exonerated from any rudeness to those whose friendly roof is sheltering us.”

The girl looked at me steadily.

“I beg your pardon,” she said at last.

“What is your game, Gear,” inquired Wenford, “that you sing so small all of a sudden? Do you think these people worth apologizing to?”

“If I have offended them—certainly.”

“There is nothing to be got here but bad brandy, and bad accommodation for man and beast. By all that’s holy I’ll build a new house here in opposition, for there’s nothing fit for human beings

to be found in this den. You've had it all your own way too long, mother Ray!"

"Oh! we've had all the custom of these parts, mind you. It's the only inn in Nettlewood—we're a-growing rich, Letty and I," said the old woman, satirically.

"Come on, Gear—don't stop here. I've a spare room for a bachelor friend in my house. I'll treat you like a prince."

"Thank you; but I am too fatigued to proceed farther, had I even a claim upon your hospitality. If Mrs. Ray will kindly provide me with a bedroom for the night, I shall feel obliged."

"We've excellent rooms, sir," said the old lady, with a sudden eye to business; "our charges are not high, and everything is as clean as a new pin. Perhaps you would like to see the room at once?"

"Thank you; and if you could contrive to favour me with a change of clothes——"

"You don't mind what clothes on a pinch, I suppose?"

"Oh! no. But I want these well dried by the morning. I have a visit to pay."

Wenford laughed very heartily at this. Mrs. Ray looked suspiciously from him to me.

"You're an odd fish," he said to me; "I can't make you out just yet. And you will not come on to 'The Larches?'"

"I must ask you to excuse me, sir. My position does not warrant me in becoming your guest, Mr. Wenford."

"Well, if you won't come, you must leave it alone."

He pressed his French cap—which he had not removed—still more firmly over his head, tossed off the rest of his brandy, and marched out of the house without another word. My rejection of his hospitality had vexed him, and he evinced it by his unceremonious departure.

He had no sooner quitted the house, when Mrs. Ray broke into a shivering fit. She sat in her high-backed chair, and rattled away like a dice-box. Her bones must have rattled as well as her teeth, to make so unearthly a clatter. Letty Ray caught up my own untasted brandy, and poured it down her mother's throat.

"Have you let that fool offend you?" she asked, contemptuously.

"He always upsets me when he talks like that," she gasped.

"He was always a brute—why should we care about his ravings?"

"He's been speaking of the money."

"Always of the money—you! It will drive you to the grave—that foolish and vain thought!"

"Not vain, Letty—not quite vain, girl!"

"Hush!" with a look towards me.

"It mayn't come true," she said, without heeding her daughter, "but it's so precious near the truth! Only a woman's whim—a young woman's—between this life and a life of comfort, such as we have never known. Only a woman's whim!"

"Would you like me to show you to your room, sir?" Letty asked.

"If you please."

She snatched up the candle that had been glimmering on the table, and led the way from the room up a broad flight of stairs, to the first landing, on which an immense eight-day clock was ticking in a sepulchral fashion. Opening the door of the first room we approached, she said:

"This is your room, sir. We will send up a change of clothes in a minute."

She placed the candlestick in my hand, and went hurriedly downstairs to rejoin her mother, concerning whose powers of self-command she was evidently in doubt.

A moment or two afterwards the man Jabez knocked at my room door.

"Here be your change of clothes, sir," he said; "is there anything wanted to be got ready doonstairs."

This reminded me of "the dinner long delayed," and I gave orders at once for anything of a substantial character that might be in the house.

"You *did* come over the Black Gap then, sir?"

"To be sure. Did you not believe Mr. Wenford?"

"Oh! there be maun few folks to believe him, sir," was the answer; "I'll put the clothes down here, sir—I hope they'll fit. We keeps a few sizes on hand, for people who come the Black Gap way to Nettlewood."

Jabez departed, and left me at last the opportunity desired of getting rid of the wet habiliments. Jabez came to my door a moment afterwards, bearing on a tray another glass of brandy, to replace that which Letty Ray had borrowed for her mother's infirmities. When I took my way downstairs again I found the cloth laid in the room I had previously quitted, and a dish of hot mutton chops awaiting me.

"We have been trying to light a fire in the best room," said old Mrs. Ray, apologetically, "but the wet comes down the chimbley so, and mayhap you'd had found it cold and comfortless to-night. P'raps you'll put up with the old woman, and the old woman's room for once, sir—there's warmth here in the peat, at any rate."

"This will do very nicely."

"If you're inclined to make a stay of it—and there's no other inn, mind, anywhere's about—we'll have all things tidy by to-morrow. We don't charge high here—I think I told you before?"

"I am not afraid that you will tax me too highly for your kindness."

"You're a civil-spoken young man," she said, turning her white face towards me, with some degree of interest; "you and Wenford must have made an odd pair in the Black Gap. I wish to the Lord he'd broken his neck there, and never have troubled honest people again. I'd be glad to see that man comfortably tucked up in his coffin."

She did not express this unamiable sentiment with any degree of vindictiveness, only in a

rambling, desultory way. If she had said that she would be glad to hear that it was a fine day to-morrow, she could not have spoken in a manner less concerned. It was simply the expression of what she considered "good hearing," as brother Joseph might have phrased it.

During the consumption of my meal, Letty flitted in and out, keeping her mother's loquacity somewhat in check, I fancied. The old lady was inclined to be communicative, but the daughter evidently distrusted the topics which Mrs. Ray might be inclined to dwell upon.

"The gentleman will not care about that," or, "There's no need to trouble the gentleman with that, mother," brought the lady up so often, that she finally turned sulky, and sat facing the fire with her thin hands spread out towards the flame.

Suddenly, before the merits of the last mutton chop had been sufficiently discussed, a sudden report—like the discharge of a whole park of artillery—rang out in the night air, woke up a thousand echoes in the mountain, set the dogs barking in the fragmentary village round about the Ferry Inn.

Mrs. Ray executed a galvanic leap in the air, and came down again with the back of her head against the round knobs with which her chair was ornamented.

"There's that wretch again!" said Letty, sullenly.

"I—I hope he's blown his ugly self to atoms!" was the fervent wish of the old lady.

"May I inquire what that means?" I asked, with some curiosity.

"It's one of the Wenford whims," said Letty; "the man at 'The Larches' always fires the cannon on his lawn to announce his despicable presence home."

"An extraordinary whim, certainly!"

"It'll bust some day!—it'll bust some day!" muttered Mrs. Ray, placidly rubbing one hand over the other.

"Hark!" said Letty.

She held up her hand to enjoin attention, but I heard nothing—or rather there were a hundred noises in my ears of falling rain, and the flapping branches of a tree against the window facing me, —of the wind, and the deep baying still of the Nettlewood dogs.

"It's no good asking me to hark this half hour," said the mother.

"Keep silent, then."

"What's the matter?"

"A carriage on the high road—coming towards the Ferry here."

"It's that wretch coming back, or Mrs. Zitman taking one of her mad rides to-night."

I could hear the roll of wheels plainly then. Letty Ray went swiftly out of the room. The old woman, not unmoved by the news, called out, "Light the best room!—light the best room!" an injunction which her daughter did not profess to hear.

The carriage advanced at a rapid pace—in a few moments the wheels were grating in the roadway before the house. Mrs. Ray sat with her head over her shoulder, intently watching the shadowy doorway behind her—her fixed stony gaze ahead curdled my blood a little.

Finally, there were voices in the passage—Letty Ray and another's.

"She won't show her in the best room, the jade!" muttered Mrs. Ray.

Letty entered the room, followed by a young lady of two or three and twenty years of age—a

lady with a pale and earnest face, shaded by a felt cavalier-like hat.

"Mrs. Zitman wishes to speak with you, sir," said the landlady's daughter.

CHAPTER IV.

MRS. ZITMAN.

I NEED not say that I sprang to my feet in dismay, and glared at Mrs. Zitman as at a Cumberland Fetch. I had been so little prepared to meet my patroness that night, and so much less prepared to find in her a young and graceful woman. I remembered on the instant the mendacity of Mr. Wenford—his fancy sketch of my patroness in the railway carriage recurred to me most vividly. If my amazement were also powerfully developed, no less was surprise, even consternation, visible on the delicate features of the lady standing before me. I had no doubt that some one had been equally explanatory concerning myself—I had little doubt

who was the gentleman who had taken so much pains to embarrass both herself and me.

She was a woman with a child-like face, which study or anxiety had rendered pale and delicate. Below the middle height of woman—less by half a-head in height than Letty Ray, by whose side she was standing at the moment. The broad-brimmed felt hat cast perhaps a shadow on the face that was not always there, and the black feather drooping therefrom gave a sombreness and heaviness to her general appearance. Her figure was draped in the thick folds of a Cashmere shawl, which almost entirely covered the rich black silk dress she wore beneath.

This was Mrs. Zitman, the patroness of forlorn architects—the friend in need to Canute Gear.

And I, Canute Gear, the architect, who had gained the winning prize, stood there before her covered with confusion; in all my life I had never felt so heartily ashamed of myself and my appearance. I had laughed a little at my *tout ensemble* when I was fully equipped in the spare clothes kept in stock at the Ferry Inn; now the blood rushed to my face with the consciousness of the sorry figure that I was presenting. The clothes of the unknown did not fit me; he had evidently been

much shorter and stouter than myself—between the bottoms of my trousers and my carpet slippers were at least fifteen inches of grey socks darned in many places, and from my waistcoat downwards was a horrible and unnatural bagginess. And that waistcoat consisted of forget-me-nots and roses on a white worsted ground—Jabez's Sunday best, I was perfectly assured—whilst the coat, a dress coat, fitted me so tightly, that, as I bowed to Mrs. Zitman, it cracked in many places. Grave as her face was upon entering the room, I perceived, after a moment or two, the delicate muscles relax, and the full keen grey eyes sparkle with suppressed merriment. She pressed her lips, and even bit them, after my clumsy bow—which had been made with a fork in my hand, I ascertained immediately afterwards—finally, she broke into a rippling silvery laugh, that was pleasant to hear, though I stood there the unfortunate object at which it was levelled.

“You will forgive me, Mr. Gear, but I am a little startled out of my usual composure,” she said, colouring at the hilarity which she had herself betrayed; “I have been led to expect a—a different gentleman.”

“I have been deceived myself, madam, trusting

too implicitly in a few details afforded me by Mr. Wenford."

"I thought so," she answered.

"I trust Mrs. Zitman will excuse my unarchitectural costume this evening—having been caught in a storm earlier in the day, I have been glad to avail myself of the garments that were handy here."

I was not going to allow it to appear that "motley *was* my only wear." Old-fashioned as I was, and little regard for appearances as I had always had, *that* would not do, after Mrs. Zitman's laugh at my masquerade attire.

"I thought I recognized Jabez's vest," she said to Letty, and both laughed this time, as well they might. Looking down at that worsted flower-garden—the proprietorship of which I had guessed by foreknowledge—I could afford to let them laugh, and even laugh myself at the absurdity.

"Won't the lady take a seat," said Mrs. Ray at this juncture, "won't the lady like to be shown into the best room with Mr. — Mr. —"

"Gear," added Letty, who had long since mastered the name.

"No, thank you, Mrs. Ray," responded Mrs. Zitman, "this is a mere flying visit, to bid Mr.

Gear welcome to Nettlewood. Mr. Wenford called at Nettlewood House, to apprise me of your arrival, and I—I thought I should be deficient in courtesy if I did not hasten here to see you."

She spoke hurriedly, and in an embarrassed manner. I had no doubt that she had expected to see a white-haired old gentleman, with one foot and a half in his grave. Certainly not a young man, with nankeen trousers up to his knees.

"I am indebted to your attention, madam, although I could have wished that the visit had been deferred."

"It matters little," said she more gravely, "I am glad that you have come—I shall be glad to see you at my house on Thursday."

"Thursday," I repeated.

"My brother does not return till to-morrow—he has been absent in town some weeks—I have no doubt that he will be anxious to confer with you and me concerning these building plans of yours. The day will suit you, I trust?"

"Thursday will suit me very well indeed, Mrs. Zitman."

"I don't think I have anything more to say just now—oh! the cheque. It is not written out, but

if—if you will accept, or require a few pounds on account—”

“Thank you, Mrs. Zitman, but I would prefer waiting your convenience.”

Those abominable nankeens and that disgusting dress-coat had suggested the idea that my fortunes were at a low ebb—I assumed quite an air of dignity, in order to counteract the impression created.

“Then I hope to see you on Thursday morning, Mr. Gear,” she said, and turned towards the fire, whereat good Mrs. Ray was still warming her hands. Letty Ray immediately cleared the table, in obedience to my pantomimic signal.

“Well, Mrs. Ray, how has the easterly wind affected you?” Mrs. Zitman asked.

“Poorly, my lady, poorly,” in a feeble whine; “easterly or westerly does not make much difference now. It’s all down hill to the workus and the workus funeral.”

“Not so bad as that—it can never be so bad as that.”

“Ah ! but it will be !”

“You who know me, should have better thoughts than that.”

“We’re very poor, my lady.”

"Haven't I told you always to ask when you are in need. Has my heart or my purse been ever shut against you?"

"You've been my very good angel, but the calls on us are many, and trade's been wus than usual. Only to-night that Wenford taunted me with a pauper's funeral, and the thought's been worriting me ever since. Rot him!" she muttered.

"If you require help, tell me," said Mrs. Zitman, with an animation that brought the colour to her cheek, and made her very beautiful; "what am I wasting my life here for, do you think?"

"I don't like always to be asking," whined Mrs. Ray; "your brother, Mr. Vaughan, thinks I beg too often, and that your charity is thrown away on your dead husband's sister."

Mrs. Zitman had drawn forth her purse, and was idling with its golden rings—Mrs. Ray was leering at the process from the corners of her eyes.

"You need never want, Mrs. Ray," she murmured.

She was opening her purse when Letty re-entered. Forgetful of my presence, and of the respect due to her grand guest, she stepped between her mother's chair and Mrs. Zitman, and pushed the purse back rudely.

"We do not want money, Mrs. Zitman," she cried, passionately; "we're not in need—we have money put by—pounds and pounds! When we are starving, we Rays may come to you and ask your help, but not before. Don't be hard upon us with your charity!"

Mrs. Zitman put back her purse, quietly regarding the excited girl meanwhile.

"Your mother's manner led me to believe that a little assistance might be welcome, Letty."

"It was a mistake. Please think it a mistake!"

Mrs. Zitman bowed in acquiescence, and moved away from the mantel-piece. I was preparing to beat a hasty retreat, when she said, "Don't let me disturb you, Mr. Gear," and swept rapidly past me down the passage. Before I could follow her and open her carriage door, she had entered the carriage, and it was rattling away in the rain down the dark country road.

I stood at the door of the Ferry Inn for a moment or two, but the prospect was a blank, the sign-board above my head creaked ominously, and the wind drove the rain in on me. I closed the door and returned to the warm sitting-room of Mrs. Ray.

Mother and daughter were quarrelling as I

entered ; the money question had been mooted in my absence, and Mrs. Ray had expressed a forcible opinion on the untimely interference of her daughter.

"She's a rich woman, and would never have missed a pound or two," I heard her say.

"I will not have this constant begging of the Zitmans—this false cry of help to them. It degrades us!"

"How proud we are! Vanity and pride have brought many a fool, like you to ruin!"

"Hold your tongue, mother. Here's the stranger coming."

"Don't bid me hold my tongue, you hussy!" grumbled the mother; "I'm old and weak, but I can't bear impudence yet. If the lower half of me is nearly dead, my feelings isn't."

"I will try to bear with you—I will do my best," the daughter murmured.

She dropped to a foot-stool by her mother's side, clutched her chin with one large but well-formed hand, and looked steadily at the peat fire. The mother began to spread out her own withered hands to the blaze once more.

There was a long silence. I walked to a few book-shelves slung over a small sideboard, and

took down, one by one, the few ill-bound, dog-eared volumes they contained. A strange medley of literature was there! Old histories of England, hymn books, psalm books, bibles, some bound penny numbers of stories that had been published, read and forgotten twenty years ago—the fate of three-fourths of men's attempts to lure the world in its leisure moments—a fate at which I shall not repine. There are fixed and shooting stars on earth as in heaven—I, Canute Gear, architect, don't expect a host of satellites revolving round *me*.

I took down one of these volumes of abstruse romances—years ago I could remember subscribing to a similar story, and going to bed once a week with my hair perpendicular with horror. Fashions in literature had changed since then with other fashions, and “Varney the Vampire” had gone down the stream of time unregretted and unasked for. It was odd reading, but it amused me that night; it brought back the old days before my brother Joseph's bankruptcy—the picture of a bullet-headed boy reading his penny-worth of horrors surreptitiously behind the slate whereon he was supposed to be working his school sums for the morrow. I was thinking more of the

old times than the story, though I turned page after page without skipping a line, when Mrs. Ray's peculiar voice brought me back to life at the Nettlewood inn.

"You can have anything you like to order, mind you, sir," she suggested; "there's good stuff kept here."

I took Mrs. Ray's hint.

"Thank you. I think I should like to test the qualities of the Cumberland ales."

I had taken tea with my dinner, it may be premised.

"Letty, the gentleman will take some ale," she said.

"Jabez is in the house," replied Letty, absently.

"Jabez!" screamed Mrs. Ray.

That young man appeared, received his commission, presently returned with the mug of ale which I had ordered. He looked with some anxiety at his Sunday vest as he laid the tray on the table; a suspicion that I might have greased it at dinner was haunting his mind.

By way of politeness I took the liberty of wishing Mrs. Ray and daughter good health, in true country fashion. Mrs. Ray thanked me, after con-

sidering the proposal for some time; her daughter was too far gone in her reverie to heed me.

"You'll be making a long stay here, maybe?" the old lady said.

"It depends how long Mrs. Zitman may require my services."

"Are you coming a-building down here? There's been a mighty deal of talk of a new house for the Zitmans—there's been a heap of stone brought from the quarries, and they say there'll be a good many workmen about here presently."

"That will be good for trade."

"Yes—and you're the head man, I suppose?—the slavoyer."

"The surveyor and architect—yes."

"Did you make out the plans, sir?—if it's not a rude question, of course?" she added.

"Yes, I did."

"You ain't paid for 'em yet?" was the next curious question.

"Not yet."

"Ah! your money's all right there, young man. They're rich folk up at the house—they spend a sight of money there."

"Indeed!"

Old Mrs. Ray was becoming quite loquacious.

Had her daughter not been studying the red fire so hard, she would have checked the volubility of her mother.

"That Wenford man has been telling lots of lies about you to Mrs. Zitman. Did you see her face flush up when she caught sight of you?"

I answered the remark evasively.

"It's a face many a young man might take to," she said dreamily, "and bring back to it some of the old brightness I knowed there before her husband died. Before she married *him* p'raps, I might have said."

"She must have married very young."

"Seventeen only—such a child! She was the daughter of the old lawyer who died two years ago come Michaelmas. They married her—they married her," she repeated in a husky whisper, "before she knew her own mind. They made her a rich widow, early though—and there she is for the first good-looking young man with a bold heart to fall in love with."

I shall never forget that old woman's look at me—the glittering fire each side of the eagle's beak. She was breathing hard and struggling with her breath, when Letty suddenly reached out her hand and shook her mother by the arm.

"Enough of this!—are you going mad to-night, that you play a foolish hand like this?"

"I'm playing no hand—I'm only talking in a comfort'ble manner, and it's your natur to interrupt, as usual."

"No."

"When you ain't a-staring at the fire, you're always a-worrying o' me. What have you got to look at in the fire so often?"

"My future," was the quick answer.

"It's a bad un—it will always be a bad un if you go on like this," moaned the mother; "years ago I told you of your goings on, your falling off from me. Your future, indeed!"

"Isn't it a bright one?" said the girl, pointing to the peat now lurid, and with its fire half spent; "see there the golden days in store for me, the lover who is to drag me up to riches, the friends who are to crowd round and wish me joy."

"I see nothing."

"But the ashes—take that for the truer picture of the two."

The old woman looked at the fire as though she were reflecting on the matter;—but it struck me that Letty had very adroitly turned the conversation.

A few minutes afterwards, when mother and daughter had assumed almost the same position, I expressed a wish to withdraw for the night. I was wearied of this little family sparring, tired also with the extraordinary fatigue which I had undergone that day, anxious to be in bed and sleep off a few of the aches and pains to which much climbing and falling had subjected me.

I was glad to find myself in my own room, with the door locked between me and these Rays. It had been a day of restless incident, and its variety perplexed me. It had been full of the shadows of coming events—they were thick and manifold upon the path that lay before. Figures that I had not known till that day had started into waking life, and were to influence my future—even in those early days for dreaming, I was sure of *that*. Already there were plot and mystery around, and in the vortex spinning but a little way apart from me, I might be engulfed, if more than common caution were not exercised.

I sat down at the dressing-table to think of this, with the wind rioting around the house, and the rain dashing furiously against the lattice casement. I fell asleep there battling with these thoughts, and was only awakened by the wind suddenly bursting

open the ill-fastened window, extinguishing the candle, and blowing it and the candlestick against poor Jabez's waistcoat.

After that I woke up, fastened the window again, and hurried into bed, wherein I had the nightmare; and dreamed that "Mad Wenford" was strangling me in the Black Gap.

CHAPTER V.

CROSSING THE FERRY.

THE next morning the sun was shining in at my bedroom window—the birds were singing in a clump of trees that reared their heads at the back of the Ferry Inn. Strange, distorted trees they were, I perceived upon looking from my casement—a group of hunchbacks, with their humps to the north, and their dishevelled green heads to the south. The north-wind which came swooping up that valley between the range of mountains on either side, left those trees little time to rear their heads and grow strong. Nettlewood Vale, as the place was sometimes termed, experienced more bad weather in three months than the rest of Cumber-

land did in the year. I had been told that at the inn at Keswick, and I could believe it, when I was strolling a little way along the road in the early morning before the Rays were stirring.

Outside the door I had found my clothes and boots carefully piled; the former baked to a board-like consistency, the latter covered with a liberal allowance of grease, as a preventive against further inroads of damp.

I was glad to find myself in my own habiliments again, albeit I had my doubts as to the wisdom of the step which preferred them to my yesternight's costume. Finding Jabez tarring his boat at the Ferry, I expressed those doubts to him, but he assured me I might rest perfectly satisfied about my health; no one caught cold from mountain rains, and if the clothes and boots had a trifle of wet in them, it was better walked out than baked out.

Taking the advice of one experienced in these matters, and preferring any risk to perambulating country roads in my last night's disguise, I strolled a little way along the high road as before remarked.

Lover of mountain scenery as I was, I felt more impressed than charmed by the view that lay before me on either side. A bare, desolate spot it

appeared, even with the sun shining down into the vale—a place wherein to settle down and become crushed by a sense of utter loneliness. The mountains on my left stretched on in an unbroken chain down the vale, and were destitute of foliage, save in one instance, where a myriad of larches grew up the hill side to the summit, and relieved the monotony of the landscape by its very depth of colour. I could detect a white house at the base of the mountain, amongst the taller larches; I had no doubt that that was the residence of Mr. Wenford of Nettlewood. The Ferry Inn, and three cottages adjacent, appeared to form the village of Nettlewood; signs of church or chapel in the vicinity there were none. I looked round for the residence of Mrs. Zitman, but could see no trace of it; possibly it was at the bend of the road and past the “Larches,” or was hidden behind the cliff that overhung the roadway in the other direction, where the world seemed to end in a massive wall of ironstone.

Across the Ferry were the Black Gap and its attendant mountains—black and sullen enough even on that bright morning to quench the sunshine which tried to brighten them.

I made my way to the water's edge, and en-

deavoured to fancy the view looked more cheerful from that position ; but the water was unnaturally still, and looked awfully deep and uninviting. The shadow of the Black Gap mountains was cast upon it, and seemed to kill all light there. It lay between those mountain ranges a lifeless waste of water whereon no ripple played—a looking-glass to reflect the barrenness and wildness on all sides of it. It stretched its way down the vale, and seemed whence I stood to meet another waste of water, as dead and apathetic as itself, and continue the same dreary landscape on for miles.

Whether it were the effect of the scene, or of last night's bodily fatigue, I know not, but I was seized with a shuddering fit, that took some effort of mine to conquer. I was not prone to gloomy thoughts, to morbid dreaming over unrealities that could never approach to waking life, but on that morning the dark impressions which beset me were too strong to master.

I felt my heart sink somewhat at life in this secluded spot; the mountains around me appeared to shut me from all ties of home as surely as though they were prison walls, manned by sentinels to keep watch against my efforts to escape. The place looked desolate and haunted; people who had gone

mad here from inaction, had plunged into this still water, and were lying fathoms deep below me. I thought it strange long afterwards that on that bright morning such thoughts should have beset me; remembering all that happened at Nettlewood in the days that followed my "settling down" there, I think it stranger now. All that day I found some difficulty in drifting to a lighter train of thought; but the first vista of my future was not very cheerful. I could not see any prospect of locating myself in any place beside the Ferry Inn, and the thought of close contiguity to that dreamy old woman, and that half proud, half fretful daughter of hers, was not conducive to any great degree of exhilaration.

I went skirmishing after breakfast till a late dinner hour, in the vain hope of lighting upon some habitation wherein a decent lodging might be obtained, but my first glance round in the early morning had been comprehensive and truthful, and there were not a dozen houses in the place. During that day's skirmishing I found the church three miles down the vale, and three miles distant from a second village, which I will call Henlock in this story—a half-way church, convenient to no one, but keeping the good folk of one village from

being jealous of the advantages attainable by the other. I discovered Mrs. Zitman's house also in the very spot at which I had guessed it to be—a dark stone mansion of considerable dimensions, situated at the very head of the valley, and backed by a perpendicular rock—and I discovered also the site for the new mansion, close to the water, and not a quarter of a mile from the inn. There had been plenty of stone brought from a quarry and placed on the plot of ground marked out for future building operations—where the workmen were to come from to carry out the scheme was a matter of serious perplexity to me.

I did not dine till five in the afternoon, by which time I had formed a passing acquaintance with Nettlewood. On my return to the inn, Letty Ray was standing on the little grass plot whereon the sign-post was reared, looking anxiously towards the Ferry. My "Good day, Miss Ray," gave her a surprise. She turned round with a little start, and, I fancied, looked a little disappointed at my propinquity.

"Good day, Mr. Gear," she answered almost impatiently.

"I have been wandering down the Vale in search of the picturesque."

"Have you discovered it?" was the question she put, with a bright smile that changed the whole character of her face.

"Well—yes," I answered, "the place is picturesque enough, if sad."

"Ah! has it saddened you already? And yet there are people who wonder at me!"

"Are you tired of Nettlewood?"

"I think so—I don't know. Sometimes I am tired of life itself. And sometimes I am very happy here."

She turned away and went rapidly into the house, I following her. The best room was prepared for me that evening—the little bow-windowed room to the left of the entrance where the creepers grew half over the latticed panes.

To my surprise, Mrs. Ray, whom I had considered a fixture in the kitchen, made her appearance to lay the cloth for dinner,—a singular operation, as she had a painful habit of dragging one leg about the room with her and limping with the other. She was accustomed, I ascertained afterwards, to perambulate by means of a stick, but having her hands full on this occasion, she indulged in a few frog-like leaps round the table, holding on by the edge at uncertain intervals.

"I'm a sad invalid, Mr. Gear," she said by way of apology for these antiquated gambols, "I ought to have been a lady, instead of slaving here. I'm more fit to take to my bed for life than struggle for a living in a place like this. You'll excuse me, I hope, sir."

"Nothing to excuse, ma'am."

"You're very kind to say so—you're very civil. It isn't often one gets the likes of such a civil young man as you are. You must be a blessing to your mother, when you're at home, sir."

I looked very hard at Mrs. Ray. This last speech sounded peculiarly like the solemn "chaff" in which my contemporaries at the architect's office were inclined to indulge at times. But if Mrs. Ray did not intend what she said, she had an enviable command over that parchment visage of hers. She was hanging by the table at that time, and surveying me in a half pathetic, half attentive manner with her basilisk eyes.

"Some mothers are born to have blessings, sir, and some are born to have cusses. That girl's a cuss to me!"

She lowered her voice as she delivered this assertion, but her whole expression had changed. There was real life in her face—there was the

passion impossible to feign expressed in the manner with which she shook the table with her withered hand.

"You must not think that, Mrs. Ray. I'm sure you don't ——"

"Don't I?" she interrupted, beginning to nod her head with frightful velocity, "but I do! Don't I know it more every day, when every day she turns against me more and more, and shows the little care she has for me. There's not a day without a taunt from her, there's not a day without ale with your chops, sir?"

I thought Mrs. Ray had gone mad at last, or rather given surer evidence of her mental infirmities. Then, the instant afterwards, I was left to admire her singular adroitness; Letty's skirt had brushed by the open door of the "best room," and without altering a single tone of her voice, Mrs. Ray's maundering had drifted into a simple inquiry concerning the dinner she was preparing for me.

"Ale, please."

"Thank you, sir. There's none better in the county," and with two little leaps she vacated my apartment.

"If that woman harasses me much more," I

muttered, "I must build a house for myself out of her way."

She did not appear again. I heard her scolding her daughter in the passage about wasting her time, and idling the Lord knew where, and leaving her poor mother, with her infirmities so thick upon her, to attend to all the customers! Letty, like a wise girl, made no response to this capriciousness, but relieved guard by bringing in the chops. Always mutton chops, by the way, in mountain districts, unless one is fishily inclined, and there is an aborigine to catch trout for him. I could not fail to remark, during the few minutes bestowed upon me by Letty Ray, that the girl was singularly altered from the preceding night. Her step was lighter, her voice had not that despondent ring in it, there was less of that oldness of thought expressed upon her handsome face. I could not help confessing that she looked very handsome that night; the rich olive of her complexion was set off by the deep claret dress she had chosen for that particular night's wear. She reminded me of my sister Ellen in some mysterious way or other, and yet the only resemblance between them was the raven blackness of their hair and eyes. This girl's features were stronger, sterner—

there were pride, decision, and a wonderful power of resistance, or of obduracy, expressed therein. Ellen's face was pale and delicate; the face before me was as dark as a gipsy's, and radiant with health. If the Cumberland air would only bring such roses to my sister's cheeks, it would be worth her while risking a week's teaching to come in search of them some day. Some early day, too, when I knew more about the country, and had plenty of time to escort her about the lanes and mountain passes. What a holiday that would be for her—her who had known less change and had worked harder than myself in life!

Letty completed her attendance and tripped briskly away. Through the bow-window I could see her a few moments afterwards, standing on the grass plot and looking again towards the Ferry somewhat anxiously. Was the lover, of whom she spoke so sarcastically last night, expected in Nettlewood before the sun went down? Not before the sun went down at all events, for my dinner was finished, the high mountains shut out the sunlight, and there was greyness of coming night already in the Vale before Letty entered the house with a slow, almost a lingering step.

She entered the house to receive another lecture

from her mother. They were exchanging hasty words immediately after Letty's entrance—the thin partition between the best room and the kitchen would not shut out the altercation.

"What do you want to take a walk for at this hour of the day? It will be pitch dark before you've gone a hundred yards. You were off last night, like a madwoman, for no reason that any one could see. And haven't I been alone long enough, d'ye think?"

"Very well."

"It's very bad as I see it, and feel it, and suffer from it. Letty, you're a blight!" And with this vicious summary, the old lady evidently closed her remarks for the present.

"I am not going out—can I do anything for you?"

"No, you can't."

"Very well."

"Don't I tell you it isn't very well?" snapped the mother. Then ensued a long silence; mother and daughter were in their old positions by the peat fire, I felt assured, by that time.

I drew my chair to the fire, which had been lighted for me, although the days were early yet

to think of chimney-corners. But that the nights soon grew chilly at Nettlewood, I was not long in ascertaining for myself.

It was dark night, and I had fallen into a half doze over the fire, when the Ferry bell rang across the water. I leaped to my feet and ran to the bow-window, one side of which commanded a half view of the Ferry. However, there was no view to be perceived through the murky darkness—I could hear voices shouting to and fro in the distance, and for a moment I detected a female figure, with a shawl over its head, flit past the window, cross the grass plot, and pass through the little swing gate which opened on the road. I could just see that it did not turn in the direction of the Ferry, but passed away to the left, where the thin distinct line in the darkness indicated the road to the village.

Anxious to kill time myself, I seized my hat, and made for the door, running against Mrs. Ray, who was slowly but silently dragging herself in the same direction.

The collision might have been serious, had not the landlady flung out her long arms and caught at both sides of the passage.

“Who’s that?” she cried.

"It is I, Mrs. Ray. I hope I have not hurt you."

"N—no—not much. You might have killed me though."

She could not refrain from even giving me a piece of her mind as she made room for me to pass—a quiet piece of withering sarcasm that had the effect she desired.

"It might be as well another time, sir, when you are *horsing* about this dark passage, to make sure there's no poor invalid in the way to trample on. You're going down to the Ferry, sir?" she added in a more amiable tone.

"I think so."

"Will you tell my thankless child to come back—I want her at once. It's very odd that girl can't keep still, and be a comfort to me."

She had better eyes than I had, or eyes more used to the position of affairs. For when I was straining mine into the darkness before me, I heard her say,

"Jabez has got George to help him. It's the young squire coming over, I should think."

I went out of the gate, and down the sloping roadway leading to the Ferry. I could just see a large flat-bottomed boat being pushed away from

land, and Jabez's face aglow with the light of a lantern on the seat. I strolled up and down the bank, and watched the progress of the boat across the lake—listened to the murmur of voices on the further side, as the wind wafted it now and then to my ear. I was still watching, when I felt a claw-like hand upon my arm. The old woman of the inn had crawled and hopped after me to the landing-place.

"He's coming now, sir."

"Who?"

"The squire. The brother of the handsome lady you've come down here to serve."

"Are you sure it is he?"

"I'm never mistook in my presentiments—I can read what's coming to me, days and days, sometimes years and years, afore the hour's ready for it. Excuse me leaning on your arm, sir, I've rather overdone it hopping down the lane."

She leaned very heavily against me. More than ever I objected to this troublesome old witch. I should soon hate her as heartily as Mad Wenford did. I was not surprised at any one entertaining for her the most lively and intense antipathy.

"They're off," she said, with a feeble croak; "they're coming on now. If they're damp, they'll

order brandy. Please God, their clothes are wet enough to wring! I wonder where that young wild-cat of mine has got to."

The old wild-cat looked round her once or twice in a vain search, until the propinquity of the ferry boat absorbed the whole of her attention.

"Do you see him?" she whispered.

"I see a man standing up in the boat, holding two horses by the bridle-reins."

"That's the groom," she said peevishly; "a little to the left of him—sitting down and staring at the water."

"I see now."

"He's a-coming at us like a Fate," she croaked.

"He's a-coming to affect your life and mine for ever after this. You don't know what a deal that man has in his head."

"For good or evil?" I said laughingly.

"*I don't know!*"

I was surprised at the emphasis of her reply, at the earnestness in her husky voice, at the excitement under which she laboured, and which made her grasp my arm until she pained me.

"He's a-coming at us like a Fate," she repeated, as the boat touched land and its inmates proceeded, to disembark. Jabez's companion held the lantern

to show a light on the squire's path—the squire himself an instant afterwards was on the Nettlewood side of the ferry.

“A welcome back, sir,” said Mrs. Ray, dropping a curtsey.

“Thank you, mother,” returned a voice strangely soft and womanly—a voice that I fancied was not wholly unfamiliar to me. I could not see his face distinctly at that distance, but I saw that he looked towards me for a moment before he turned to his horse which the groom had brought him, and leaped lightly into the saddle.

“Won't you stop at the inn a moment, and rest, Mr. Vaughan?”

“Thank you, mother, I am pressed for time to-night. Here, Jabez.”

He tossed Jabez a piece of silver, and rode off; the groom had returned for his own horse, which proved more refractory, and required some coaxing to leave the boat. His master was out of sight and hearing long before the groom had mounted.

“Always like a snail, you are,” commented my uncivil companion; “if I had been your master, I would have discharged you, or horsewhipped you, long ago.”

“But you ain't, Mrs. Ray, and ain't likely to be.”

"You don't know what I may be before I die, you dolt."

"I know what you are now," was the reply. It was couched in a manner somewhat enigmatical, but Mrs. Ray did not take it as a compliment. She screamed out a piece of her mind as the groom rode after his master; we could hear him laughing as he galloped off.

"They treat me like a worm," she muttered; "they're all alike in these parts. Some of these days I'll go to London, and see what they'll say to me there. Jabez," leaving go my arm to talk to the ferryman, "what did the squire give you?"

"Half-a-crown," was the answer, and somewhat a reluctant one.

"Let me see—let me see."

She went hopping towards him with extraordinary alacrity, and I took that opportunity to escape. Naturally courteous as I might be, I had not come to Nettlewood to escort crippled old women about dark lanes.

I hurried back to the deserted inn. Finding my room looking very dismal without a light, I took the liberty of proceeding to the kitchen to borrow the landlady's till her return. To my surprise, Letty Ray was there, sitting by the table,

with her head buried in her hands, the shawl that had draped it trailing at her feet. She looked up as I entered, and asked impatiently what I wanted there?

Her face startled me—it had become so haggard since I last saw it, the eyes were swollen so.

“I came to borrow the light until——”

“Take it.”

“Not if you wish it, Miss Ray.”

“The darkness suits me best. Take it—take it,” she cried, with an impatient drumming on the table with her fingers.

I took the candlestick in my hand, and left the room. I heard her fling herself towards the table again, and resume her old position before I closed the door. In my own room I could hear her sobbing very violently, until the shuffling of feet in the passage announced Mrs. Ray's approach; and then there was a pause, succeeded by a wild snatch of song from Letty's lips—a song that echoed through the house and made the glasses on the little sideboard ring again.

CHAPTER VI.

A LITTLE TALK WITH MRS. RAY.

THE next morning a groom brought me a letter from Nettlewood House. "Another delay," I muttered before I broke the seal, "a life of action is not yet likely to commence here." It was a delay of but a few hours, however.

"Nettlewood House, July 3, 18—.

"Mrs. Zitman's compliments to Mr. Gear, and trusts to have the pleasure of his company to dinner this evening at five. No visitors are expected."

I was not a lover of dinner parties, but it was a

relief to me to find that the day was not to pass without some portion of the business which had lured me from London being brought on the *tapis* for discussion. "No visitors are expected" was evidently a hint not to be too particular concerning my dress—not to allow the prolonged absence of my portmanteau to stand in the way of my visit.

However, the portmanteau made its appearance in the carrier's cart at twelve in the day, much to my peace of mind, which the invitation had naturally tended to disturb. There was at least a dress-coat in my travelling trunk—somewhat faded and old-fashioned—and I proceeded at once to hang it over a chair, with its back to the fire to reduce its multiplicity of creases.

This was an operation that appeared to stir up a little of Mrs. Ray's bile. Her lower extremities being worse that day, or being pronounced worse by the owner thereof, she had refused to stir from the high-backed chair whereon I had found her the first evening of my arrival at Nettlewood.

The fire in the best room was not lighted in the day-time, so that I was forced to beg permission for a little space at Mrs. Ray's to carry out the process of rejuvenescence.

"You're going company-keeping, young man," she said, after eyeing my dress-coat critically for some time.

"Mrs. Zitman has kindly asked me to dinner."

"She never asked me to dinner in her life, although I am her dead husband's next of kin," she complained; "they don't think much of *us* at the House. Ah, ha!" she added, with an extraordinary chuckle, "but they must—but they must, too!"

I was leaving the room when she called out,

"Do you want this coat attended to, Mr. Gear?"

"No, thank you. I think it will do very well as it is."

"It's as sparrow-tailed a gibbet as ever I saw in my life! What do fine folks put such things on for when they're going into company?"

"Fashion—simply fashion."

"You're a pretty sort to talk of fashion," she muttered. This latter observation was not intended for my ears, which tingled somewhat at the meaning conveyed in the criticism. But perhaps I was a pretty sort—it was very probable indeed.

I was leaving the room again when she once more arrested my progress. Letty being busy in remote regions upstairs, and business being slack, Mrs. Ray found inaction and loneliness somewhat

too monotonous to let me slip easily through her fingers. She was a woman who required amusing in her way.

"You're in a very great hurry this morning, Mr. Gear."

"N—no—not particularly."

"We had a young man lodging here last spring—he came for his health and never found it, poor object—who was the nicest young man you ever clapped your eyes on. He took a fancy to me, and called me his dear old mother, he did. Weak of him, wasn't it?"

This last question was uttered in an acrid manner, which I disregarded. Very kind of him, I thought it, and remarked as much.

"He used to come in here—when I sat all of a heap, just as I do now—twice a day to talk and read to me. He was just like a son; I 'spected him very much, and he 'spected me and my complaints, and didn't make game of 'em."

This implied that I was in the habit of "making game of 'em"—an unfounded implication which Mrs. Ray might have spared me, although I thought it was scarcely necessary to deny the imputation.

"He was a trifle too fond of reading prayers to

me, but then he was brought up to that business, and it soothed me off to sleep, if he didn't cough too much—which was another bad habit of his. You're so different to him, now."

"Am I indeed?"

"Ah! he was an earnest, hard-working young man—he looked at things very differently to you."

I could not refrain a laugh at this.

"Why, my dear Mrs. Ray, how do I look at them?"

"You look at things that may make or mar you—God knows which, I don't know or care myself—with uncommon quietness. You're a man that takes things easy, I know. If you were ruined to-morrow, you wouldn't grieve much—if you had a disappointment to strike you down, you'd grow fat whilst it lay a-top of you. You're slow-going, and may do for these parts, although good luck may pass you by, and you never a bit the wiser. Oh! I wish I was you, with your strength, your years, your chances!"

The old woman caught at her crutch-headed stick in the corner, and brought it down with a thump upon the hearth-stone. There was a something on her mind that troubled her about me.

Mrs. Ray's emphatic summary took three-fourths

of the breath out of my body; it was forcible—it was in some respects not away from the truth, and did infinite credit to her powers of observation. My brother Joseph had once given me a similar analysis, blaming the patience with which I suffered and jogged on, as though grieving against the unalterable could have pushed me forward by a hair's-breadth. Mrs. Ray saw what Joseph Gear had seen two years ago—nothing deeper or more intense. Of my own character I was vain enough to have formed a different conception. Half in jest and half in earnest, I sought to shadow it forth to this singular old woman.

“Taking the ills that flesh is heir to with composure may be a failing of mine, Mrs. Ray—I am not ashamed of it, as curing those ills has not lain in my power. Still in all my life I have never let a chance slip by me, though I have had but few, and in my own quiet way have sought to find them here and there. But when the time for action comes, which may come even here—I don't know—there will be no obstacle to daunt my progress, and no danger which I shall not feel myself strong enough to fight against and surmount. When the battle of life begins in earnest, I will be a foremost man!”

"You mean that? Why, you've quite a colour, sir."

"Oh! yes—I mean it. But when there's no battle, Mrs. Ray, it's rather ridiculous to be prancing about on a war-horse, and flourishing a drawn sword against enemies that have not existence."

"I like sperit," affirmed this picture of indolence, "praps you'll do, after all. When the battle comes, I'll drag myself up a hill to see the fight, and pray for the bravest and the luckiest. It mayn't be you—it may even be Wenford of the Larches, and, hate him as I do, I'll pray for him too with all my heart and soul. The bravest and the luckiest—ah, ha!"

The stick dropped to the floor, and the yellow wrinkled hands went one over the other with a rapidity that made me dizzy to watch them. Of what battle was she thinking to disturb her so?—was it the one *mêlée* of which she seemed ever dreaming by the fireside there?—which she might have implied to me on the first night of my acquaintance with her, if the daughter Letty had not interfered? The old woman's earnestness impressed me strangely—had already warmed me a little above my usual temperament. I could not divest myself of the strange ideas besetting me; I

went away into the green lanes with the clash of the coming battle in my ears; the life of action—the life that keeps the eyes bright, the cheek flushed, and the heart beating preternaturally fast—seemed advancing nearer every day. The distant waterfall which dashed down the rocks into Nettlewood Water appeared to me that day like the hum of the enemy's forces advancing from the misty future. Life was on the change with me—I should change with it presently!

CHAPTER VII.

NETTLEWOOD HOUSE.

I PUT on my dress-coat at half-past four in the afternoon. The wrinkles were out of the back, but there was a small burn in one of the tails. I was not of a suspicious turn of mind, but the idea instantly suggested itself that Mrs. Ray had done it on purpose. By any theory of red-hot projectiles from kitchen fires I could not understand how that burn could have been drilled there, but I made no accusation, and if it were a fresh eccentricity of the good lady's, I forgave her on the spot.

I surveyed myself very carefully in the cracked

dressing-glass on the drawers, and drew a comparison, not particularly odious, between myself dressed for dinner at Nettlewood House, and the half ostler, half nondescript, who had presented himself to Mrs. Zitman's astonished gaze at Nettlewood Inn. When I left London I was afraid that I was not looking staid and old-fashioned enough; now the impression that I might have looked less grave and owl-like seized me, and rendered me a little uncomfortable. So opinions change with the changes which the world presents, in each of its revolutions round the sun.

I walked to Nettlewood House. There was an old fly, and an old horse to match, that might have conveyed me thither, but my purse was not full enough to allow of such extravagancies, had I been even more impressed with the conviction that walking about a mountain district in evening dress was a decided conglomeration of the sublime and the ridiculous. Fortunately there were few natives to be struck with dismay at my appearance; Mrs. Ray broke into a feeble titter as I went out at the door, and two quarrymen, making for home across the Ferry, cried "My Gosh!" at the spectral visitation. That was all the inconvenience until I neared Nettlewood House, when a

little boy, who had been tending sheep in a neighbouring field, ran screaming across country for his life.

Before Nettlewood House, and going slowly up the broad carriage drive to its extremity. The house looked duller, damper, and more desolate the nearer I approached thereto—an old-fashioned mansion, slowly and surely dropping to decay, and placed ever in shadow by the dark mountain side against which it had been built.

A tall, angular Scotchwoman, with light hair, responded to my summons at the door. So stern and sphinxy a woman, in so fusty a brown silk, that my nerves jarred a little at this first specimen of the Zitman household.

Before I could announce my presence in any manner, she said very briskly :

“Ye’re Mr. Gear, I suppose? Coom in.”

The door banged to, and shut me in a spacious hall, the walls lined with dark mahogany, and the floor paved with tessellated marble.

“This wa’. They’re waiting for ye.”

I left my hat on the hat-tree, and followed this specimen of Gaelic uncouthness along several passages. There seemed no end to the corridors—dark and shadowy, despite the old-fashioned lamps

which were already lit there—as we made our way along them.

She opened the door and announced me.

“Mr. Gear’s coom.”

And Mr. Gear entered the spacious withdrawing-room, opening upon the dining-room at the further extremity. Mrs. Zitman and her brother rose to receive me, the lady of the house extending her hand as she advanced.

“Welcome to Nettlewood House, Mr. Gear. Let me have the pleasure of introducing my brother to you. Mr. Vanghan—Mr. Gear.”

Mrs. Zitman’s brother and I shook hands. He expressed in a few easy sentences, and with a peculiarly melodious voice for one of the sterner sex, his satisfaction at making my acquaintance. He looked and spoke like the well-bred gentleman.

He was a handsome man, above the middle height, and of seven or eight-and-twenty years of age. A face that was very prepossessing at first sight—clear and well cut, with a keenness, almost a craftiness, in the two brown eyes that met your own. To a physiognomical critic, the white forehead might have appeared a trifle too prominent and bumpy above the eyes. It was a singular

forehead, and attracted the observer at once—narrow but high and prominent, and surmounted with a mass of brown hair which seemed curling every way at once. Altogether it was a striking head, surmounting a form that, if not the perfection of manly grace, was at least well-made and indicative of no small amount of strength.

And Mrs. Zitman? Though I have described her brother in the first instance, I had naturally turned to her on entering, and been struck more than ever with the youth and grace of my patroness. In her quiet grey silk evening dress she looked still more young and fair. I could not imagine, at the moment, that she had experienced so much trouble, been courted, wedded, widowed, and yet have remained so childlike in appearance. It was only when one looked at her face, so pale, so intense in its anxiety, that one guessed at the cares she had known, and the struggle to keep strong that it had been with her of late years. Like her brother's, it was a singular face; in her deep grey eyes there was, though less marked, the same keenness of expression, softened, as was natural enough, poor woman, by the troubles which had shadowed her young life.

“My sister has, I believe, informed you, Mr.

Gear, that my absence from home has been the cause of a little delay in the prosecution of the business which has called you hither. I trust we shall make up for lost time now."

"I am at your service, sir."

"We are anxious to proceed with the house—we may harass you even a little with business before the evening is over. Janet," turning to the woman, who stood gaunt and statuesque against the door of the adjoining room, "do you wait to-night?"

"O' coorse—it's the first nicht hame o' the lad I ha' nursed, and wasna it a promees?"

"Ay, to be sure. This is an old friend of the house of Vaughan, Mr. Gear," he said, with a pleasant laugh. "Caleb Balderstone the second, in petticoats a little too short for her."

"Ugh!" commented Janet, who had heard the remark.

"Those old-fashioned followers," he added, in a still lower tone, to me, "are still existent in these old-fashioned parts. I confess it is pleasant to meet with them, and the contrast between them and the stately lackeys one is bored with in London, is favourable to the servitors of auld lang syne. They are rough diamonds, Mr. Gear, but

there is the true fire inherent in them, and we can value them—even honour them—as they deserve. You who are a stranger must excuse the rough attendance for this once.”

Mr. Vaughan making his excuses for attendance to one who had been always in the habit of waiting upon himself was somewhat of a burlesque, but I bowed and begged him to make no apologies.

“Will you see to my sister?” he said, with a careless wave of his hand in her direction.

I offered my arm to Mrs. Zitman, and we preceded Mr. Vaughan into a spacious dining-room—well-warmed, well-lighted, and yet again impressing me—as the whole place had—with its strange gloominess. The furniture was too massive for the room, the moulding of the cornice was too heavy, the crimson curtains before the several closed windows seemed too large and too absorbent of the light shed down from the old Gothic candelabrum above our heads.

Even the dining-table was too large for us, and seemed a hindrance to pleasant dining-room chat. I sat a yard and a half apart from the hostess and brother, who at each end of the table must have been half lost to one another. It wanted twenty per-

sons at that table, at least, to give life and animation there—and it wanted some one less gaunt and frigid than the woman flitting in the rear, to give a cheerful air to the background of the picture.

There was little conversation during dinner. Mrs. Zitman, at least, was of a thoughtful and abstracted turn of mind. The idea even struck me that she was under a certain sense of constraint—which was an exaggerated idea to possess me, and for which I had no valid grounds to go upon. A shy, almost a startled look towards her brother, before she spoke to me; an embarrassment in her manner of reply; a timid, hesitative manner adopted to the brother—all these might have been natural ways with her, but seemed, even in that early time for judging, singularly unnatural to me. This constraint—if such it were—suddenly and wholly vanished before the stately series of courses was at an end; she shook it all off with a toss of her head, as though she were shaking away a water drop. After that she led the conversation, spoke of my profession of architect as a grand and noble one, alluded more than once to my plans for the new house she intended to erect; asked me what I thought of Nettlewood, and the country adjacent.

"It appears a very picturesque locality, but—"

"Go on, Mr. Gear," she said, quickly.

"But to one who has been used to London streets all his life, to the bustle of a great city, it has a singularly depressing effect."

"Indeed!" she said, in a low tone of surprise.

She looked towards her brother, but his eyes were fixed attentively upon me, and did not turn to meet her gaze.

"It is merely the change," he remarked.

"Possibly," I replied, "and this is my first experience of a mountain district. Nettlewood, for instance, is so surrounded by tall barren hills that one seems walled away from life by them."

"It is life in prison—the prison airing-yard, only a trifle larger than usual," remarked Mrs. Zitman. "Haven't I said so, Herbert, many times?"

Herbert laughed very pleasantly at this impetuous appeal.

"Oh! you have said so, Mary, when the woman's love of change has made home rather more distasteful than usual——"

"Not distasteful."

"Well, more objectionable—more dull," he corrected. "I suppose there are times when the

home-shadows will crowd rather thickly upon us. In the old days, Mrs. Zitman was one of a happy family," he said, turning to me, "and life was spent with an indulgent mother and father, now unhappily lost to her. She and I are going to try the new excitement of building, Mr. Gear—hence the pleasure of seeing you at Nettlewood House."

"You speak as if I were the only victim to the dulness of this isolated district, Herbert," she said, in a lighter, gayer tone, that seemed to render the room a hundred degrees brighter on the instant, "as if you never succumbed to the shadows, and fled away to the stirring life of cities to escape them. You men are always so patient!"

A sepulchral voice at the back broke in upon the colloquy, and startled me.

"Lor! the bairn must have change, God bless him! He's young, and na fit for mopin awa' in this spot—he cooms back looking fifty punds the better for 't."

This interruption was taken as a matter of course. Herbert Vaughan laughed and struck his hand smartly on his knee; Mrs. Zitman turned in her chair and looked back with a bright smile at the gaunt speaker. I could tell in an instant, by

that smile, how a life of less isolation would have affected my hostess for the better.

"And am I fit for moping, Janet?—should I not return to Nettlewood fifty pounds the better woman?" she asked. "Why, Janet, you are a bad casuist."

"Ye may ca' me what names ye like, maistress," she responded, "but the bairn's richt. And ye've seen life, lady, and praps it wadna be befittin' your young weedowhood to be gadding about the gran plaases ye and I hae heerd sic talk aboot. And, lady dear, ye and I are women, wi' mair patience, an' war made for hame—wasna we, noo?"

"For home, Janet. Ay!"

It was a wail over a home that was not near her at the time, and thrilled me strangely. I had been watching the face, which had changed for a moment, when the serving woman had spoken of her widowhood—only for a moment, expressive of pain and suffering.

Herbert Vaughan had seen it too. He waved his hand to Janet a little impatiently.

"That will do, Janet—company, remember."

"I dinna forget, Mr. Herbert. A' my leef I ha' kenned my plaas."

"That's true."

He said it with a laughing glance towards me, but the servant did not detect the irony of the reply.

"The young maister kens that weel eno'," she muttered.

Dinner was over a little while after this, and replaced by a dessert of some pretension. A luxurious dessert, set off by a series of old-fashioned, yet costly Wedgewood ware.

"You are a judge of china, Mr. Gear?" remarked Mr. Vaughan, seeing my attention directed to the dessert service.

"Oh! no. But Wedgewood ware is somewhat familiar to me."

"This is an old service of Mr. Zitman's—my brother-in-law was a great collector of china. If we have time we will look over his specimens presently."

"We shall not have time to-night, Herbert," said Mrs. Zitman, firmly.

"No—I'm afraid not. Mr. Gear, will you assist Mrs. Zitman?"

I did my best to attend upon Mrs. Zitman; the long serving-woman, whom I had detected more than once staring at me with a very basilisk gaze, took her departure; the crimson of ports and

clarets, and the golden gleam of sherries, shone from diamond-cut decanters amongst the Wedgewood.

Mrs. Zitman did not linger long over dessert; when she had retired, Mr. Vaughan brought forth a cigar-case from his pocket, and pushed it along the table towards me.

"You smoke, Mr. Gear?"

"No—I thank you."

"Well—smoking is a bad habit, which grows upon a man, and becomes next door to a disease. I have a friend at 'The Larches' who is smoking himself to death."

He alluded to Mr. Wenford, whose name I did not care to dwell upon just then.

"Very unwittingly you touched on dangerous ground a little while ago, Mr. Gear," he said to me; "as we are destined to see a great deal of each other, you will pardon me if I put you on your guard."

"I shall be obliged."

"I need make no secret of the singular will which Mr. Zitman left behind him. If you stay a week in Nettlewood, you will hear the story from the good people at the Ferry Inn, or in the village. Mrs. Zitman inherits her late husband's property

under condition that she remain at Nettlewood, a place for which he possessed a deep affection."

"And Mrs. Zitman?"

"A dislike closely approximating to an antipathy. You will perceive now, Mr. Gear, that your sweeping and—pardon me—your unfair criticism will not tend to Mrs. Zitman's more favourable consideration of the locality."

"I am very sorry," I stammered—"of course I was not aware—" He hastened to interrupt me.

"Pray offer no excuses, Mr. Gear—rather allow me to plead *my* excuse for intruding a family matter upon you at the first period of our acquaintance together. By Jove, these family matters will get in the way of plain-sailing, at times."

He lighted his cigar, and seemed to be reflecting seriously for some moments. Suddenly he made a dash at family matters again.

"They have already been talking about us at the Ferry Inn, I presume, Mr. Gear?"

"They have mentioned your name once or twice."

"But have not thrown a light on the family history, which they are in possession of, and which every idle tourist who puts up there is compelled

to hear before he quits them. Upon my honour, those Rays are the oddest people in the world!"

He laughed at their oddness—put his cigar on the corner of the dessert plate to enjoy his laugh with greater ease.

"They will tell you in a day or two of another clause in Mr. Zitman's will, affecting them more seriously than you possibly imagine just now. Mrs. Ray was Mr. Zitman's sister."

"So I have heard."

"One of those poor relations that do turn up when a man has made a fortune," he said; "a relation that had been at daggers drawn with her brother years and years before he died. He remembered her in his will, however. The fortune Mr. Zitman left behind is bequeathed to Mrs. Ray in the event of my sister being foolish and unwise enough to marry again. There's the whole of a history I need make no attempt to disguise from you—the little boys you meet up the mountain side looking after the sheep know it as well as my sister and I. It's not an unnatural piece of confidence forced upon you a few moments after our introduction to each other—it is simply my method of telling our own story, without any dra-

matic effect. You are sparing with the wine, Mr. Gear."

He dismissed the subject as unceremoniously as he had entered upon it; he required no comment, which, however, I should not have cared to make. He entered into no details—only a concise summary of his sister's position he placed before me, leaving the lights and shadows to be filled in by those outside talkers to whom he had adverted. It was a cruel story of man's jealousy and selfishness—existing beyond the grave, to be a sting to those he had benefited after his own eccentric fashion. This Zitman had been an old and covetous man in his life-time, I felt assured already—I could imagine him Mrs. Ray's elder brother, and picture him "in my mind's eye" very correctly. The only thing that perplexed me was the reason for Mrs. Zitman marrying the man—with any love of gain, I could not associate that young anxious face which had shone before me twenty minutes since. The story disturbed me long after Mr. Vaughan had dismissed it and was speaking of London to me; I was thinking more of it than of his discourse—it led me more than once to answer him at random. There was an uncomfortable suspicion at the bottom of all this confi-

dence of Mr. Vaughan, which would intrude and make my ears tingle. That gentleman who preferred smooth sailing might have been anxious to shadow forth the truths of his story, lest any unworthy ambition—such as a fortune-hunter might have—should lead me astray in the early days of our acquaintance. I who might not be unwilling to make a dash for an heiress, would pause awhile if her money were ever beyond my hope of grasping it. He might have thought that, judging as a man of the world, and so have kindly put me on my guard. And after all, was it natural to feel aggrieved at an explanation that saved so many mistakes, supposing even his story *were* framed with any intention to warn me?

A random answer, which he very naturally did not understand, and requested a repetition thereof, brought me to the surface of things; thoughts foreign to the present hour I dismissed immediately. I paid every attention to his subsequent discourse, and was struck with his general knowledge of books, poets, painting, sculpture, and lastly, architecture. He was better read than myself, and I had been a student all my life, and not wasted much time apart from books; he had a retentive memory,

and treasured details to an extraordinary degree—every minute he reminded me, by an apt quotation or reference, of how much I had forgotten. There was a well-arranged store-house behind his high, white forehead.

He was an agreeable companion during that after-dinner hour; a man that instinctively won upon you by his frankness and *bonhomie*. There was no pride in his manner, no *hauteur* that implied his consciousness of being higher in the scale than yourself. He was anxious to please without appearing anxious; his laugh was the most pleasant and melodious I had ever listened to. With this man, as with his sister—a patron and a patroness, however much their manner disguised the fact—I should get on very well at Nettlewood.

The notes of a piano, played in an adjoining room, arrested our attention here, and reminded both of us that we were lingering too long over our wine.

“We are scarcely courteous to Mrs. Zitman,” he said, rising; “with your permission, Mr. Gear, we will adjourn to the drawing-room.”

He led the way out of the dining-room by a door opposite to that by which we had entered,

and went across the landing-place to a second door, before which some heavy curtains were hanging to exclude the draught. In a moment afterwards we had entered the drawing-room.

CHAPTER VIII.

MY PATRONESS.

AN old-fashioned drawing-room to match the rest of Nettlewood House, but comprising within its four walls articles of as great a value and costliness as any modern *salon* in London or Paris. Cabinets of ebony and ivory, of ebony and silver, tables of costly marqueterie work; statuettes, bronzes and caskets, of ancient date, but unmatchable. A wealth of riches sunk in the strange shapes and materials shut in by the dark wainscot. There was a rich Turkey carpet on the floor, and tapestry of a fabulous value excluded the little daylight that might have filtered through the window that July evening.

Mrs. Zitman was sitting before the piano, listlessly striking a few chords—chords of a wild, melodious character, that one could not listen to without thrilling strangely in every nerve, and which seemed half appropriate to the sombreness of the room in which we were.

Mr. Vaughan looked at his watch as we came into the room.

"I half expected Wenford this evening," he said.

Mrs. Zitman's hands dropped into her lap as she exclaimed :

"That man again! Why that man?"

Mr. Vaughan laughed at her surprise.

"That man, Mary, is surely not so very objectionable. Now you and he perfectly understand each other's little foibles, he may be borne with, for the sake of the friendship between him and me, my sister."

"I have not much to complain of—he is good company at times," she said, hurriedly; "if he be a friend of yours, and will consider himself *only* a friend of yours, I will venture to add that I shall be glad to see him."

"To be sure," said her brother, heartily; "by-gones are by-gones, even in Nettlewood, and Wen-

ford, after all, is only an eccentric man, with one of the best hearts in the world."

"Possibly."

She left the piano for a side-table, whereon were writing materials. With a very rapid dash she began writing in a long narrow book she had drawn from a drawer. There was a grand flourish, the tearing of a leaf from the book, then an advance towards me with the paper fluttering in her hand.

"Short reckonings make long friends, Mr. Gear," she said, with one of those rare bright smiles which so wholly changed the expression of the face it lighted up; "and I am short of friends in Nettlewood."

I took the paper and glanced at it. It was a cheque for two hundred and fifty pounds, payable at the Carlisle Bank, Cumberland. It was the prize for which, some fifteen months ago, I had fought hard to win. I bowed over the fair white hand, and thanked her.

"Just a little business before Mr. Wenford comes to dash every sober thought away with his brusqueness," she said, leading the way to the fire-side. "Herbert, will you join us?"

He was standing by the table, looking at an old

illuminated missal which he had taken therefrom. He shook his head at the suggestion.

"Details of business are my abomination," he said, "I leave the matter entirely to my more practical sister and the architect."

"This way, then, Mr. Gear."

I was sitting by the fireside with Mrs. Zitman the instant afterwards.

With an aptitude for business remarkable in a woman, and so young a woman, she dashed into facts and figures connected with the new Nettlewood House which was to supersede the old. In a few minutes I perceived that she had wholly mastered my plans, and knew them by heart.

"And this house you calculate will not cost me more than five thousand pounds," she said; "that was the sum stipulated in the advertisement which asked for plans. You can promise this?"

"Yes."

"A few hundreds may not matter much—to a few thousands I should object."

"Mrs. Zitman need not fear so grave a mistake in my calculation of 'quantities'."

"Next week there will be fifty men, under an experienced foreman, at your disposal, from seven in the morning till five. The builder will call

upon you at the Nettlewood Inn some day early in the week, and discuss the whole matter with you. I believe that it is his intention to lodge at Henlock, with the greater portion of his men, whilst the works are in progress. You will understand that you are *le capitaine en chef*. I trust all to you—you are responsible for all."

"I hope to be deserving of your confidence, madam."

"I think you will—there is something in your face I trust at once."

My face turned the colour of beetroot at this frank admission; she, who detected it, coloured also at the effect that her hasty words had had upon me, although she laughed a little at my embarrassment.

"They are such hard Cumberland faces hereabouts," she took the trouble to explain, "stolid and wooden, a mask for the mind at work underneath. I'm not attempting a clumsy bit of flattery when I say, yours is a face I can at least understand better."

"Well, I have not much to conceal, Mrs. Zitman," I said; "there are no secrets to keep my mind ill at ease."

"You are a lucky man," she replied, hastily

and vehemently ; "yours is a fair world, free from plotting and unharassed by plotters. But this building?"

"This building," I repeated.

"Must be finished by Christmas. Call in a hundred extra hands, and we will ransack Cumberland and Lancashire for them, if necessary, but pray spare me another Christmas in this mausoleum."

I affected not to regard her singular eagerness.

"I will do my best—with good workmen I can almost promise it."

"Thank you," she answered, quite gratefully ; "I shall be glad to escape from here. Does not this place strike even you, a stranger, with a chill?"

"It is a fine old mansion," was my evasive answer.

"When I was a child, I had a horror of it. I was lost once and taken here for shelter till my friends could be sent for, and the house nearly drove me mad then. I did not think at that time that I should ever marry its owner, and come here to live—that its shadows were to haunt me and keep me restless ever afterwards. You are smiling at my excitability, Mr. Gear."

"I assure you, no."

"I think I shall be able to settle down in a new home, where the associations will not be sad ones. Oh! I have such hopes of that, though I leave my brother behind here, and become still more isolated."

This appeared strange, but she did not stay for an explanation. She was a rapid speaker—*was*, perhaps, a little nervous or prone to excitability.

"You will not mind me interfering with your plans a little, in good time—suggesting a bay-window whence a look out down the vale may be obtained, or a fitting place for a study, where I can scribble my rubbishing poems when the fit of construction is on me?"

I thought of Mr. Wenford's warning in the railway carriage; I was thinking of it when Mr. Wenford himself was announced—not by the gaunt female, but by a smart footman, in a dark-blue livery. Mr. Wenford entered in full evening dress—or rather that more ancient style of evening dress which found vent in white neckcloth, white vest, and a prodigious cambric frill. He entered very quietly, and with a grace for which I had not given him credit heretofore. He shook hands with Mr. Vaughan, he bowed formally over

the more delicate hand of the hostess, he turned and shook hands very heartily with me, in my turn.

"Mr. Gear, I am very pleased to renew our acquaintance, begun in the Black Gap. That was a hard fight of ours for Nettlewood Ferry. I believe, Mrs. Zitman," turning to that lady, "I have related the full particulars to you already?"

"You told me an incoherent story the same night, I believe," she said, a little contemptuously, "along with a story more ridiculous and untrue concerning Mr. Gear."

"Upon my honour, I am heartily ashamed of that little *escapade* of mine," he exclaimed, "it was part of one of my mad fits that people talk about and exaggerate down here. One of the worst of them, lasting, I regret to say, six months come to-morrow."

Mrs. Zitman flushed scarlet—hers was a tell-tale face, like my own, and betrayed her feelings somewhat too demonstratively. I saw at a glance that six months ago Mrs. Zitman was connected with the last mad fit of her guest.

"I ask forgiveness, Mrs. Zitman," he added, "it *was* a fool's trick. There, is not that openly

confessed? You, who hate tergiversation, will acknowledge that at least."

"Forgiven, Mr. Wenford," she replied.

"Shall we shake hands upon it?"

"If you like," she answered, laughing, "if you will promise never to misunderstand me any more."

"I have outlived all misconception," he replied, "I am the soberest soul in Nettlewood."

Mr. Wenford and Mrs. Zitman shook hands. I saw him look at her with a mournful intentness, which was very new to me, on his face; as he turned away I certainly heard a heavy sigh escape him. And yet the moment afterwards he had knocked the illuminated missal from Herbert Vaughan's hands.

"What a studious young hermit you are still!" he exclaimed, laughing at his friend's blank look, "even in the best of society poring over the rubbish that you keep as plentifully sprinkled about here as in old Zitman's time."

Vaughan frowned, and looked from him to his sister. She had not heard the last remark, however.

"Oh! I'm always forgetting," Wenford said, with a short laugh.

Mrs. Zitman heard this.

"Forgetting what, Mr. Wenford?"

"To ask you for a song—the voice of Beauty to charm and soften the Beast."

He laughed at his own comparison. For politeness sake, though he did not look as if he appreciated the joke, Herbert Vaughan laughed too, before he turned to his sister.

"Mary, will you favour us?" he said.

She rose at once, and crossed to the piano. With her usual rapidity of action her hands were gliding over the keys, her voice was welling forth in that great drawing-room—that splendid desert of dead relics.

She had a voice of an extraordinary sweetness—a powerful voice for one naturally so slight and delicate. It rang nobly forth, and must have echoed along the corridors where the servants were flitting, and lured them to stand and listen for a while.

"A fine voice—well trained and powerful," said Mr. Wenford in my ear.

"Very."

"It's the voice of a syren—she sang old Zitman out of his soul, his senses, and his money-bags, five years ago with it. She's done damage with it

since, though she didn't mean it," he muttered, in a low tone.

He walked to the fire, and poked at it briskly, in the middle of the second verse. A look from his friend arrested that minor eccentricity, and he subsided into a chair, and nibbled at his thumb-nail instead.

The remainder of the evening passed in a manner not distinguishable from other meetings of a similar character. In this company one forgot the gloom which each seemed to confess hung about the mansion, as a November fog hangs about warehouses on the river's margin in London. The conversation became general, and was well-sustained: Vaughan sang a fashionable opera morceaux; Wenford attempted "The Wolf," in a fine bass, that would have been finer had it not cracked so often, and broke down utterly before the first verse was ended. I was pressed to sing, but from a perfect knowledge of my own incapacity that way, was compelled to decline. After singing, we had one rubber at whist, and the three, at least, played with an intentness and skill as though they were playing for life, instead of sixpence a corner. These country folk, I thought, take a strange interest in life's frivolities—apart

from the turmoil of cities, even games of chance become matters to be studied gravely. There was so little to disturb the still life of the picture here.

The party broke up early—Mr. Wenford leaving with myself, and lighting a cigar by the hall lamp before he ventured into the night air. He wore his cloak with the red lining that night, and looked like a gigantic life-guardsman as he stood bidding Mr. Vaughan good night on the door-step.

"You'll find my carriage come round for me half-an-hour hence. Tell Tom to go back again, I shall walk home. Good night."

"Good night," echoed our host.

Wenford passed his arm through mine, and in this friendly contiguity we proceeded along the carriage drive together.

In the dark country road, he said—

"Well, Gear, what do you think of them?"

"What do I think of them?" I repeated.

"An odd couple—are they not?"

"I see nothing particularly odd about them," I replied. "I have been received very warmly at Nettlewood House, and am grateful for their kindness and hospitality—for the cordiality extended towards me as to their equal in birth and position."

"They're hospitable enough—kind enough in their way. We don't strut about in this wilderness with our heads very high in the air, and a new friend *is* a new treasure. I knew you'd do. Why, I took to you myself, man."

"Thank you," I said, laughing.

"I suppose you know by this time Mrs. Zitman's story? You haven't seen the Rays and Herbert Vaughan for nothing."

"The story has been related to me."

"Zitman was a disagreeable old devil living—he leaves an unpleasant smell of brimstone behind him still. He lived, man, with uncharitableness with all men, and he died as happily as he lived. How I hated that man!—how he hated me, good God!"

"Has he been dead long?"

"Two years and a half. He crushed all life out of his young wife before he died—you can see his memory weighing her down in every word."

"She appears nervous or excitable."

"It's her natural manner now—I remember her so different! But then," with a hollow laugh, "we were all different once! Have you been told yet by Mr. Vaughan, or by communicative Mrs. Ray,

that I proposed to Mrs. Zitman six months ago come to-morrow?"

"No."

"I have got the start of them at least. Yes, I charged full butt at the will, and, with no regard for the beggary *in futuro* of Herbert Vaughan, Esq., offered this mutton hand to Mrs. Zitman. She wouldn't have me, Gear."

"Indeed!"

"She sent me raving and blaspheming away, I remember. As if I wasn't to be preferred to the old miser who gave her her name. As if any one would have thought she set store by the gold he left behind for her comfort."

"I don't think she does."

"Why didn't she have me, then?"

He asked the question so fiercely, and would have resented so warmly the real motive, which had already struck me very forcibly, that I did not care to disturb the harmony of our companionship by suggesting the truth. He hinted at it himself the moment afterwards.

"She might not have fancied me, or my ways, but I think the money was at the bottom of it. If there were a lover there instead, I would have shot him, as I would shoot him now, like a dog,

were he to cross my path and take her for his wife."

"Is that quite fair?"

"I shall never trouble her again with my love-suit—I've drunk three-fourths of the tender passion out of me; but no one else shall ever marry Mary Zitman without running in danger of his life. There, that's a true and particular confession, Gear—see how I take you into my confidence, you, my sworn brother-in-arms!"

I did not like his confession—in my heart I resented it as though he had been warning me, as Vaughan might have warned me a few hours ago. Warned me of things that could never happen by any possibility—that I dared not even dream of—that I laughed at in my own room, long after he had crushed my fingers together in his iron grip, and bidden me "good night."

CHAPTER IX.

A LETTER FROM ELLEN.

THIS reached me the following morning. I insert it here in its proper place, withholding all remark. It threw a little light upon the strangeness of my last serious conversation with my sister:—

“Kennington Road, July 2nd, 18—

“MY DEAR OLD BROTHER,—Will you let us know as quickly as possible how the world is treating you down in Cumberland? Mother had a dismal dream about you last night, and has been inclined to fear this morning that something has happened. As if your dear steady old self were not capable of steering clear of danger in any shape or form. As if anything ‘out of the way’

—what an ugly phrase that is, Can!—were likely to beset you in the grim mountain region whither you have fled from us. Write soon.

“I have been thinking, Can, of our last talk together coming home from Joseph’s house, of your puzzled look at me as if you doubted or distrusted me for the first time in your life. Well, my dear, have patience, and wait my time to clear up a little mystery that is shutting me in, and yet from which I shall escape. It concerns you more than you think, or I might tell you at once; it might influence your life for better or for worse—I fear for worse—down in Nettlewood.

“Pity me, Can—think of me who never had a secret in my life, who never could keep one, shut up in a world of my own, wherein I can take no confidant to myself. I am only fidgety, though not unhappy. God knows, in the midst of it all I have great cause for happiness—that I am looking forward to a great change beyond the miserable round of teaching the Burnetts—that steadily, but surely, I shall emerge from the mists into a brightness which will make my heart lighter than you have known it since that great misfortune which beggared the Gears. In a few weeks at the latest you will hear full details of the life in store for

me. Don't be anxious—all is going on well. Even the green willow in our back garden is looking fresher and braver—augury of braver times for

“Your affectionate Sister,

“NELLIE.”

END OF BOOK II.

BOOK III.

A STRUGGLE WITH FATE.

" Have we been tilling, sowing, labouring,
With pain and charge, a long and tedious winter,
And when we see the corn above the ground,
Youthful as is the morn, and the full ear,
That promises to stuff our precious garners,
Shall we then let it rot, and never reap it?"

BEAUMONT AND FLETCHER.

" I am two fools, I know,
For loving and for saying so."

DONNE.

CHAPTER I.

CANUTE'S CONFESSION.

EARLY in the month of July, the new mansion was begun. Life began, too, in Nettlewood, and an air of bustle pervaded that little mountain district, such as had never before been remembered by "the oldest inhabitant." The site of the new building was farther away from the wall of ironstone, and close to the Nettlewood Water—above the Ferry by half a mile at least, and near the water's head.

Every morning an army of workmen came trudging from Henlock, where there was more accommodation for them, went busily to work at

Nettlewood, dined—the majority of them—at the Ferry Inn, trudged back in the gloaming to Henlock. Business began at Nettlewood with me—the matter-of-fact business of stones and mortar, of elevations and windows, gable-ends and porches; the interminable study of “quantities,” kept me ever employed. There was less time to ponder on the dulness of the scene in which several months of my life were to be spent; less of the atmosphere of romance which in the beginning appeared to be enwrapping me, despite my efforts to remain my old self in everything.

This for the first fortnight, and then I had little to do but superintend the progress of the works, urge forward the builders, as I was urged forward by Mrs. Zitman in my turn. There came a time when I had leisure to think again—when Ellen’s letter began to perplex me more than it had in the early days of its delivery—when Herbert Vaughan and his sister became subjects for my deeper study the more often I was brought in contact with them. Vaughan and his sister were a strange couple—there was something in each that interested me—their manner towards each other struck me as peculiar.

Mrs. Zitman visited the works thrice a week at

least, unfavourable weather excepted. In her feverish anxiety to be quit of the old home, she was always complaining of delay, scolding me at times for not pressing forward the men to efforts which verged on the superhuman. When I hinted once that if the building were completed by Christmas, it would be scarcely safe to constitute it at once her habitation, she exclaimed—

“Directly the roof is on, I will have fires in every room of the house. We will chase the damp from the walls very speedily.”

Her brother was with us at the time. He turned to me with a laugh.

“She has no pity on one who is to remain in the house from which she is determined to escape. I acknowledge the gloom that hangs over the place; what will it be when the fair presence that has tended to lighten it, flits away hither.”

“You are strong-minded, Herbert,” replied his sister; “you are a student, and can live in a world of your own. More, you can leave home, and enter fresher and brighter worlds, from which I am debarred.”

“Yours is a hard fate,” he said, ironically.

She was quick to reply. There was a flush on her face as she answered him.

"It is," was the reply.

Herbert Vaughan laughed, as though he tacitly disputed the assertion. I doubted it myself, and thought that Mrs. Zitman was a trifle too despondent over the fortune that had been left her, and the conditions annexed thereto. But there were days when she was less despondent than others—days when she was almost gay, and gave evidence of a naturally light heart.

These days, I began to observe, occurred when her brother was not with her; the "dark hour" was only upon her when Herbert Vaughan accompanied her to the works. I remember him going to Carlisle for three days, and the great change there was in her during his absence. She came more often to watch the progress of the building; to suggest, a little timidly, a change here and there; to trip lightly from one point to another, singing snatches of her favourite songs, some of which I had listened to in the stately drawing-room of Nettlewood House. She ran up the mountain side to see the effect the view had from the heights—I could hear her singing there in the bright sunshine like a lark that had escaped from its bondage. She descended flushed and panting to my side again, looking very beautiful.

"Those who drop into Nettlewood from the mountain heights—the indefatigable tourists who try every inaccessible part for the sheer love of danger—will have a fine view of my new house, Mr. Gear," she said; "will wonder, perhaps, who is the *happy* denizen of so fair a habitation."

For a moment she spoke a little scornfully, but observing the intentness of my gaze, she cried,

"And I shall be happy there, too. I will try hard to keep down all regrets, and think how fortunate I am to be apart from temptation, poverty, and fifty other things that might render me more childish and weak than I am. Herbert always calls me childish and weak—what do you think of me?"

She looked fearlessly into my face. The light in her deep grey eyes daunted me a little. I could not help hesitating in my answer to so leading a question.

"Tell me in five minates' time," she said, laughing at my surprise; "I am curious to know the estimate you have formed of your hard task-mistress."

In five minutes' time she was at my side again.

"Well, Mr. Gear?"

"Well, Mrs. Zitman?"

"Have you arrived at any conclusion. Am I childish, weak, frivolous, whimsical, bad-tempered, good-tempered, wise, or foolish?"

"I—I really must decline to answer," I stammered; "I have had no opportunity of estimating your true character."

"You don't think that I am a very tiresome woman?"

"No."

"I don't worry you?"

"Certainly not."

"That will do, then. People about here think I worry them. I can see weariness—and 'oh! how I wish she was gone!'—on half the faces I meet. If I go over to Henlock, and amuse myself with the school children, the poor governess's face becomes more harassed. If I stay at home, Herbert complains of my restlessness, or of my interference with his studies; if I and the rector discuss parish matters, the clergyman talks of his head aching after a while. Sometimes I fancy that I speak too rapidly, and that people cannot follow my ideas readily enough, and are too polite to call me to order. What a sad thing it is that there is no one to scold me, or to tell me a downright and honest piece of his mind."

This dialogue occurred during Herbert Vaughan's absence. I never forgot it; to a certain extent it displayed Mrs. Zitman in a new light—although it proved still more the excitability of her disposition. Although I had not the courage to confess the impression which I had conceived of her character, I could see that she was more like a child than a woman; that there was the frankness and ingenuousness of one who had mixed little in society, and been accustomed to much of her own way. She always appeared to me a light heart kept down by adverse circumstances; a bright nature seeking ever to escape from the depths into which it had been submerged.

I could but fancy that her brother did not make any great effort to encourage the better nature, the brighter thoughts; in fact, as I saw more of them both, I could but perceive that her natural manner was objectionable to him, and that he took a great deal of pains to curb it. He did not thwart her so much, as he laughed at her attempts to be gay, and satirized her little peevish exclamations at the dullness of her existence. More than that, I fancied that he watched her, and that she knew he watched her, and became more restless in consequence. Hence her more bright and natural

moods when business or pleasure took him beyond the mountains. But in all moods, let me confess at once, she became an attraction to me. I found myself, against my will, thinking too often of her—becoming interested in everything she did and said, finding the days pass very slowly when she did not brighten by her presence the new scene of my labours. All this I confess to have happened in three months, to have worked so extraordinary a change in me, that thinking soberly of it in my own room, I sat aghast at the vortex into which I was deliberately allowing myself to be drawn.

Matter of fact life went into that vortex and was whirled away, at the end of those three months—the first romance of my life I entered in upon with my eyes open, and with danger and despair in advance of me. My whole character changed; I felt to have gone back from eight-and-twenty years of age to my one-and-twentieth year again—to feel the heartburnings, jealousies, follies of youth, uncertain of nothing but that there was a divinity to worship, and a passion to prey on the worshipper.

It could never come to anything, I was sure of that! In the first place, I took that grim fact to my heart, and nursed it there, as the Spartan boy

nursed his fox. Honour, or duty, even my love for her, kept that distinct and real—was the boundary line between my folly and the sober life I pretended to be following. It could never come to anything, I repeated twenty times a day—they became talismanic words to keep me strong. She was a lady, above me in every respect—had it been even possible to awaken in her some fragment of a love for me, I could not marry her without bringing her to ruin—without ruining her brother, and others who were, perhaps, dependent on her bounty. That was a concentrative selfishness which I scouted with all the warmth of a heart that, at least, had not always made its owner the first consideration—which assured me of the folly of loving—though there was no power on earth to keep me from silently, passionately dreaming of her.

It all began with my pity for her—that pity which is akin to love—which I found apply so truly to my case. I saw at once that she was a disappointed woman—that hers had been a disappointed life. From one source and another had been wafted towards me the fragments of a story easily pieced together—easily explained. The old story of a sacrifice for position—of her father, a

retired London solicitor, thinking how good a chance it was for his daughter when Zitman made her an offer of his hand. A long struggle before consent—a marriage—an ill-assorted union, wherein there was much unhappiness—an early widowhood—a selfish will, that bound her down to the old thoughts, almost the old life, unless she fled to penury for an escape. A free, artless disposition, perverted from its natural development, meeting with obstacles at every turn, and struggling against them ineffectually. A generous heart, shipwrecked and drifting on an angry sea, that tossed it to and fro, and gave no rest.

All this I saw and pitied—saw and loved!

When I discovered this at last, I discovered also the danger on all sides of me. Proud of my strength, I resolved to sink the madman's feelings I had engendered, and hide, even from her, a sign of the folly which, despite all sober reasoning, had come to me. I felt that the novelty of my position was embarrassing to begin with—soon I should live this down, and pass slowly on the beaten track, with never a one to guess at the pent-up fire within me. There became a fresh motive for exertion—for pressing on the works, so that the mansion might be completed by Christ-

mas time, and I might go my way and vanish like a dream-figure from the troubled little sphere in which I moved.

I believe I kept my resolutions, and maintained my disguise well. There was so much depended upon the assumption of my usual self, that it would have been villainous to pass beyond the line I had drawn with an unfaltering hand.

I did not dream for an instant that, had I attempted it, I should have impressed Mrs. Zitman with the fervour of my passion, but I should have made enemies for her, nevertheless, and strengthened more than ever the vigilance of her brother's watch. Her brother's fortune trembled in the balance with hers, and he would have been a hero not to let the sordid thoughts of the world cross him at times, and keep him distrustful.

And yet if he were distrustful, there was never evinced to me one decisive proof. He played his cards well, and I could but guess at the progress of the game by the more anxious or the more sad look visible on his sister's face. He showed no suspicion of me; on the contrary, hypocrite that I was, I deceived even a man more than commonly observant. He could not read down to my heart, whereon was written a story that would have

paled him with affright, and he therefore asked me very often to Nettlewood House, invitations which I found courage to decline at times, and which at times, also, I accepted against the common sense that warned me of seeing her too often.

To see her was to perceive that she was unhappy, and that was to pity her, to love her, to burn with a desire to be her champion, and save her from her splendid misery. So from July till September—till my love was nearly two months old, and I had seen more of Mary Zitman's character, of its delicate shading, its fair salient points, which only needed one careful hand, one loving heart, to make her the happiest of women. It was pleasant to me, although I made no sign, to be sure that I was a welcome guest at Nettlewood House; that I was a relief to the shadows there against which Mrs. Zitman protested. We were all very good friends—brother and sister had both confidence in me; Vaughan had no fear that I was falling in love with his sister; she did not start from me with affright at the thought of the one central figure she was to my romance.

But the suspicion came at last to one of them. It had become with every day a devotion more difficult to conceal—her smiles, her scarcely con-

cealed tears, had too much power to affect me. I was a fool, who thought all signs were to be ever hidden, when, with every day my love grew stronger, and fretted more impatiently against the barriers in my way.

I was a visitor there one evening at the latter end of October. The weather had become suddenly very cold; on the mountain tops snow had gathered and melted again—signs of the winter fast advancing on us.

I had arrived late, and found brother and sister sitting together in the drawing-room. Long Janet, as the woman was generally termed, had admitted me, and led the way to the hostess.

“They’re unco mopish this nicht,” she said to me, confidentially, outside the drawing-room door; “the lang nichts here are na liked—there’s too muckle time for them to talk thegither. Canna ye coom mair aften here?” she whispered, hastily; “they bear wi’ ye, better nor maist people I’ve kenned coom.”

Before I could fully comprehend the meaning of this rapidly delivered speech, she added—

“Dinna say I hae said a word. It’s na my place to interfere atween the bairns, God bless

'em baith! Deed, and they micht na like it at a',
now I coom to think o' it."

She looked at me with a scared expression.

"You may trust me, Janet."

"O' course I meight," she said, with a grim smile of relief; "dinna they trust ye, baith o' them?"

"I hope so."

She opened the door as I spoke.

"Here's Mr. Gear coom," she announced, and shut me in the drawing-room.

Vaughan and his sister were talking earnestly by the fireside. They ceased abruptly as I entered. It had been a discussion of more than usual importance, and had affected one of them, at least, in more than an ordinary degree. Mrs. Zitman was crying; I saw her white hand dash some tears impetuously away, as the servant warned them of my coming.

"It is over-precaution—I cannot bear it this year!" I heard her say, as I entered.

The subject of their discourse did not appear to be a secret. Mr. Vaughan immediately alluded to it.

"We have been discussing a subject which is never a pleasant one with Mrs. Zitman," said

Vaughan, turning to me; "the cold winds, which necessitate a more rigorous confinement of my sister to the house. Whilst the north-east element comes sweeping up the vale, my sister's life is in danger every time she passes the threshold of her home."

"I have not suffered from cold for two years now."

"Because we have been cautious—because I have exerted my authority as brother, guardian, protector, Mary."

"And kept me a prisoner here every winter. Mr. Gear," turning to me suddenly, "do I look so delicate a woman that a north-east wind is to wither me up?"

Mr. Vaughan did not allow me to reply.

"We have had the best of advice. From all quarters the one refrain is, 'Take care—take the greatest care.'"

"Put yourself under lock and key, and constitute Janet Muckersie gaoler in ordinary to the establishment. What advice?" cried Mrs. Zitman, scornfully.

"Which you will follow during my absence at least. Which you have promised me to follow," said her brother.

"Yes," she answered, with a sigh.

She looked at me with a half sad, half humorous expression.

"Farewell all the teasing interruptions to the business of the day, Mr. Gear—all my harass about the delay, the snail-like movements of the men, the sleepy foreman, the still more sleepy builder. I retire from the world of action to my cell here, until a flash of sunshine relieves guard, and says, 'Escape whilst there's an opportunity!' And as the sunshine comes very seldom here in winter without the north-east wind, which is my bitterest enemy, they say—I don't believe it—why, I shall have to bid you good-bye for many weeks, perhaps; I have made a promise in a weak moment again—there is no help now," she added, with a sigh.

I did not answer. The blow was a heavy one, and bore me down for a time, even in their presence. It was unprepared for, therefore I showed my disappointment by putting my hands on my knees, and staring thoughtfully at the fire. No more of the little figure; the pale, intellectual face beneath the broad felt hat; the pleasant change of mind, and the womanly petulance at the apparent slowness of the builders; the airs of fretfulness even with me if I fell not in with her views immediately;

the girlish laugh that escaped her now and then, and made my head spin when all was going well, and she was pleased with everything.

Her health would not allow her to venture from home in the winter months, and Vaughan's absence precluded me from calling at Nettlewood House. He was going away to-morrow for a month—for a whole month, I heard him say, and the remark rendered me thoughtful, and the fire before me more than ever an object of interest.

I was roused suddenly to a sense of my misbehaviour.

"The news appears to sadden you, Mr. Gear!" remarked Vaughan.

I started, coloured, looked towards him, and tried hard not to flinch from the bright searching eyes that were transfixing me. But I flinched, and at the first sign of my weakness I saw the first suspicion steal over his face, and for an instant darken it. We were both on our guard the moment afterwards. I was wondering whether a guilty conscience had not tended to deceive myself when he spoke again.

"During my absence in town, Mr. Gear," he said, "I trust you will look in here for a moment now and then to report progress, and keep my

sister's interest alive in her pet scheme. Any cheques that may be wanting to prosecute the plans she will draw. Mr. Wenford is always kind enough to cash them for us."

"When it may be thought necessary, I will call here for a few moments, Mr. Vaughan."

"Thank you; I am sorry to incur so much extra trouble upon you."

"No trouble," I answered in a manner that was a trifle confused, for I was still a trifle bewildered.

Mr. Vaughan, however, heeded nothing now; he spoke of his journey to London, and asked very politely if he could be of assistance to me in any way—which he could not, I replied, with many thanks for the offer of his services.

Going away that night, Mrs. Zitman said, very suddenly—

"If I should not see you again, Mr. Gear, I rely upon your interest in my plans to push forward the work by every means in your power. Before Christmas you have promised me—before Christmas I rely upon entering my new house."

"If it be possible," I answered.

"But nothing is impossible with perseverance," she entreated; "if you fail me, it will be the

greatest disappointment of my life. You are energetic— give me your promise, Mr. Gear.”

“ I promise.”

I replied very decisively. I could not resist that firm assertion ; she begged so earnestly for it, and I felt that it would make her lonely hours in the old home more easily borne. So I said, ‘ I promise,’ with all the confidence I could command.

Mr. Vaughan stood watching his sister's face very intently ; he did not appear to heed my words so much as the effect they created on his sister. He followed me to the hall, and shook hands very heartily.

“ I leave you in charge, Mr. Gear,” he said ; “ I may trust you in every thing ?”

“ In everything, Mr. Vaughan.”

He thanked me again ; he had been full of thanks that night. His concluding words were spoken in a jesting mood, but they left the impression which they were intended to convey.

“ Then there will be no accusing judge to upbraid you on my return ; to exclaim, ‘ Thou bad and unfaithful servant ! what atonement canst thou make for the trust thou hast abused ?’ ”

He said it with a burlesque air, but there was an

under-current of reality, very deep and stern, and he intended its full force to bear upon me. He succeeded.

CHAPTER II.

A RESCUE.

THERE was no sign of Mrs. Zitman or her brother at the building the next day.

"The wind blows from the north-east, does it not?" I asked of the nearest workman.

"Ay, sir, to be sure it does. A rare place for north-easters be Nettlewood Vale."

I was aware of it. Every tree bent its head away from that cutting blast; every hedgerow tore itself away from it, and struggled with it, and cowered under it for its life; the leaves were whirled away before their time then, and branches strewed the roadway all the winter months, snapping above the heads of passers by, and threatening death-warrants.

The north-easters had set in the beginning of that October. The hardy mountaineers bore up against it; their wives at Nettlewood and Henlock who were of delicate health, or had chest complaints, did not venture without doors—the clergyman's daughter, who was not expected to live, was borne away to Hampshire in search of the strength it was impossible to find—the snow settled on the highest hill points, and there was a fringe of ermine on the summit of the Black Gap.

Mrs. Zitman did not venture forth; Mr. Vaughan imitated her example, and spent his last day at Nettlewood with his sister. I was sure that he had not taken his departure; he must have crossed the Ferry and gone by the Lower Lane, as it was called, or he must have passed the country road on which I kept watch all day.

The intense bitterness of the cold that October morning reminded me of the frost which might set in, and hinder all business alterations. The building was making a feature in the landscape then; a hundred men raised the echoes daily with the clang of chisel and trowel; the foreman, fired by Mrs. Zitman's past enthusiasm, stood and bullied and swore in the Cumberland dialect all the day long—the builder, who was a short man,

trotted and puffed about, and fell over things, and scolded the foreman. It became my duty to scold the builder in his turn, when he did not look sharp after the men.

The builder and I held a council of war over the coming frost, at which he shook his head lugubriously. He didn't recollect much building being carried on in the winter time, Cumberland way; he stared with horror when I assured him that Mrs. Zitman had made up her mind to spend Christmas Day in her new home.

"Good Gad, sir,—it'll never be done—it can't be done!"

"Have another hundred men on. There is nothing elaborate about the building, and we may push forward during the next month."

"I'll go to Carlisle, and see what hands I can muster," said Mr. Sanderson.

"Get them by any means—advertise for them. Mrs. Zitman will not mind the expense. The men *must* be obtained."

"Yes, sir."

He looked very bewildered by the stern air which I had assumed. He promised to hunt up the men from Carlisle and Lancashire; doubling the staff would certainly precipitate the work.

He'd go to Carlisle the beginning of next week.

"Go to-morrow, Mr. Sanderson. You will oblige me."

"Yes, sir. To-morrow it shall be, sir."

"Pooh!" he said, wiping his forehead with his silk handkerchief, after I had gone. "There'll be some piping-hot work between this and Christmas Day. We're in for it now, Mr. Caulfield."

The foreman thought so too. He perfectly coincided with Mr. Sanderson in every particular.

Wandering about the works that day, I commenced planning a variety of schemes for keeping the men at over-time—for working them early and late, and paying them well for extra service. It was a question of time rather than money now; I felt bound by the promise which I had made to Mrs. Zitman. In the restless fever that possessed me then, I felt I should have little mercy on those whom I directed.

I was the last on the works that day—the workmen took their departure in the direction of Henlock; the daylight died out above me; the heavy shadows filled the valley, and stole up the mountain side; the stars came out one by one, and glittered in the water spreading out so silently and stealthily below there in the Vale.

I felt inclined to linger there that night and wander up and down the roadway, to and fro, to and fro, beset by the spirit of unrest. I was distracted in mind; the lover's fever had come to me in my turn—I who had laughed at such things in books, and turned to ridicule the unreality therein, felt that the hour was on me when solitude was congenial, and that the white stars were friends of mine to apostrophize my fate to. There was a morbid satisfaction in lingering about the waste of material piled round the place. When I turned at last to go, a something held me back, and the wind, surging by me, seemed to whisper, "Wait a while!"

The conviction settled so firmly upon me, that I took another turn 'amidst the piles of hewn stone, and went along the waste ground where the terrace was to be built in some future day. In the early spring perhaps—certainly not before Christmas. Mrs. Zitman must be contented with the erection of the house. Would it be completed, after all?—would a hundred extra men, an army of them, have any effect in expediting the work to completion, as I had rashly promised? My heart sank a little when I thought of it deliberately; there was so much to do—after all the months of labour, it was

such a wreck of stone-work standing there as evidence of action.

I was thinking of this somewhat ruefully, when the rapid clatter of horses' heels arrested my attention. The sound was from the direction of Nettlewood House; in an instant I divined that Mr. Vaughan had chosen that late hour to take his departure for a scene more full of life. He was coming gaily on; he was in good spirits, and singing a snatch of song as he advanced; it was his voice, I could have sworn to it amongst a thousand. He experienced no sorrow at leaving his sister in that desolate house alone, but in his selfish gladness felt his heart more light at the prospect of the change which he was seeking.

"He was all self," I thought; "all that stood in his way he bore down or leaped over. What motive to take him to London could extenuate the circumstance of leaving one so weak and excitable in the great home she dreaded?"

He passed by me carolling gaily. He had great animal spirits; he was the best of men for a life in the sunshine—when the storm came what would become of his butterfly wings, I wondered? I said this a little contemptuously; I had not fathomed his character—more, I had formed a false estimate

of it. This man's life I knew afterwards had been stormy and tempestuous; there were fiercer storms looming up from the horizon, and he would have the will and nerve to meet them. His was a life for storms.

He passed me, and I stepped into the road and looked after him. The night had deepened then, and he was soon lost in the gloom. I went a little way in his direction, and then turned and walked rapidly back towards Nettlewood House. There was a satisfaction in looking at the mansion where she sat immured, under the bar and interdict of her brother's will. There was a light in the window of the drawing-room, but her figure did not cross the lighted blind; I felt that she was alone and in trouble there.

Half-an-hour afterwards I retraced my steps. The night was cold and I walked fast. To my surprise the rattle of horses' hoofs receding along the country road startled me at the next bend, where a solitary tree overshadowed the roadway.

My first impression was that I had been watched; my second, that the horseman had been loitering on his way, chatting perhaps with that figure which I could distinguish hastening along the footpath that led by a near cut to the Ferry. The footpath

was in my route, and I struck into it; the figure turned, and I fancied looked back at me before it hurried away. Suddenly it vanished.

I stood and rubbed my eyes, and then made a dash towards the place where it had disappeared. There was a high bank to the left, and a narrow path below it, at the very water's edge. I felt that there was danger abroad that night—the temptation, perhaps of death, besetting some one very weary of the world. I ran to the bank, and leaped down into the narrow path. Far ahead of me a woman's figure was hurrying away into the darkness that enshrouded the source of the Nettlewood water. I followed it, sure of the shadow of death hurrying on with that woman and tempting her. I ran at my utmost speed, calling to her to stop; the mountains on all sides of me caught up the word and shouted "stop!" to her. I gained ground, I fought hard with the breath that was deserting me—I was close upon the woman, when she turned suddenly and flung herself with an awful recklessness towards the water.

The bank was steep and rugged there, and her dress caught in the roots of a tree which jutted thence; for a minute there was a struggle to free herself—I could see her arms fighting against this

hold upon her life; I flung myself on the bank, twined my arms round her, and lifted her by main strength from the water. Her long hair was dank and dripping with wet; the shawl which had covered it drifted into mid stream; the water from her garments and from my coat-sleeves formed a pool at our feet. Stooping down, I looked hard into her face.

"Letty Ray!" I cried.

She rose sullenly to her feet—I could see her eyes glittering like a wild beast's in the darkness.

"Let me go," she said, "I am not dangerous now. I have seen the devil too near me, and the fit is over!"

"This is very mad and rash, Letty. What earthly motive could influence you to so desperate a deed?"

"A man's lies. A coward's blow at all the hopes he had fostered, the bright life he had drawn for me, and which I was to share with him. He talked of making me his wife—he loved me so—and he meant my ruin. God seize his soul this night!" she cried.

"Hush!—hush!"

She wavered, and looked hard at me.

"Well, not so bad as that," she exclaimed, "I'll

love him through all his scorn of me; he won me by speaking fair—if his words were false, my love will last. I swore it to him sixteen months ago.”

“He’s not worth a thought of an honest girl’s, Letty.”

“I’ll think of him,” she said doggedly. “I’ll love him through all the deceit he has tortured me with; when he marries another, I’ll weary him and her by my affection for him. He brought me to love him—now mark this!”

She caught me by the arm, and looked me hard in the face.

“He may hate me now, find me ever a bar between him and his future, but I will love him till his dying day—I will haunt him all the days of that life you have been fool enough to give me back. I was face to face with death a short while ago—it seemed pleasant to drift away from all the littleness and vexation and horrors of my poor existence. I who haven’t a friend in the whole world—not even in the mother who bore me.”

She gave vent to a passionate wail that froze my blood; she covered her face with her hands, and broke into a convulsion of tears and sobbing, painful to stand witness to, and feel so helpless to alleviate.

"Courage, Letty, there are friends in store for you. Honest friends to help you on, and a future far less dark, in which you will be sorry for the madness of this night."

"Thank you—thank you. You're very good to talk like this, though you don't believe it more than I do. I'm going home now. Will you play the friend to me, and say nothing of this?"

"If you will promise never to attempt so wilful a crime again."

"I promise. I'll take my oath, if you like!"

"No, Letty, I'll take your word. I can trust you."

"Don't follow me—don't answer any questions of my mother. Go at once to your own room. It's awfully cold to-night, Mr. Gear!"

She shivered as she spoke.

"Change that dress as soon as you can, Letty. Good night, girl—try and keep strong."

"I'll try, sir."

She turned back towards the Ferry Inn. Though I kept her in sight, I had no fear of her again tempting her fate that night.

CHAPTER III.

SENT FOR.

HALF-AN-HOUR hence all that happened in the last chapter appeared very like a dream to me. When I entered the inn, and glanced towards the great room facing me at the extremity of the passage, I could see mother and daughter in their old positions by the fireside—the mother upright and stoical in her straight-backed chair—the daughter crouched on the stool, and staring at the lurid glare of the peat. This was the family idea of comfort, and I did not intrude upon it that evening. I took Letty Ray's hint and proceeded at once to my room. I went early to bed, although I slept less that night than ever I had done at Nettlewood.

There was much to think about—the incidents of the last few hours would perplex me, and render me restless. He who had sought to betray Letty Ray, to lead her, through her love for him, to ruin, was, in my opinion, easily guessed at—could, in fact, be no other than the brother of Mrs. Zitman. How had I been deceived in him! What tortuous depths to that man's character would it ever be impossible to sound! What a crafty, silent way of procedure, making no sign, only shadowing forth here and there some evidence of evil constantly at work! If it were he whose duplicity had cast this horror on the poor girl's life, he was a man to be ever on guard against, to be under the suspicion of every honest-thinking mind. There was danger on the path one trod with him—when he made least sign, he might be most preparing for his spring. And yet was I not prejudging him—was I even certain that Herbert Vaughan was the man who had met Letty Ray that night? Granted even that it was the man, why should I suddenly fear danger to all in his path, to all opposed to his interests? He was a young man, and this girl might have thrown herself in his way; she was vain and impulsive—one incident might have followed upon another, until

the old, old story was played to the last chapter. Then Letty's pride saved her, although her despair hurried her away to the water.

Vaughan was a young man open to flattery, might not in the first instance have intended more than a few compliments, but have gone step by step on the devil's road, meaning no particular harm, surged by the feelings of the moment, which rendered it pleasant to mark the evidence of this girl's growing affection for him. Then the old temptation, the false step towards the abyss, and an unforeseen end to the story. I would make allowance for Vaughan's youth, for the temptation which the girl might have offered by her manner; I would not be hasty, and prejudge that man.

The next morning it all appeared more dream-like than ever. Every-day life went on at the Ferry Inn in the old course. I could not believe that the Angel of death had been face to face with Letty last night. She had the enviable art of repressing her emotion; of hiding the torture of her heart by an apathy beneath which it was impossible to guess what affected her. She might have seemed, in my eyes, that morning, a little more thoughtful; her face have been expressive of a

set determination to confront the new world on which she had entered, and not shrink from the stern realities that had met there. But to those who knew nothing of the troubled workings of her heart, she was the every-day Letty; she played her part like a clever actress, who had studied the matter deeply, and was not likely to make a mistake in one word, or in one bit of by-play which she had taught herself to perform.

Before I went away that morning to the building, I felt that I betrayed my astonishment too much. Letty followed me to the door and said:

"You have been studying my face very intently this morning. What did you expect to see there?"

"A shade of sorrow for last night's madness, Letty, a shade of——"

"Despair at the dull life before me," she added; "you haven't studied us women very deeply, Mr. Gear. The peasant girl as well as the duchess is a good hand at the mask when there's a world of dark thought to hide. Don't look at me so hard again, or my mother's sharp eyes will see more than you do."

I was going away, when she said:

"I haven't thanked you for saving my life. I

am sorry for the act—glad for the chance that threw you in my way. Letty Ray has much to live for yet.”

She turned abruptly away, and went into the best room to clear away the breakfast things. I went along the road towards the building.

On that day, and for a fortnight afterwards, we went bravely on with the house; the extra hundred men were found and set at work, and there were vigilant eyes upon the amount of labour performed. Still I could see that the mansion would not be finished—that the shell of it alone, by incessant application, might stand a new feature in Nettlewood landscape. A room or two might be even rendered habitable—should be rendered habitable—but that there would remain a mass of unfinished material, was natural and to be expected. The next time I met Mrs. Zitman, for her health's sake, I must persuade her to remain a little while longer in the house she was so eager to quit.

During that fortnight I did not see her. The north-east wind continued scouring down the vale—every night there seemed a hurricane at Nettlewood; one was awakened by the roaring of the

wind, and the unceasing rattle of the windows in their frames.

At the expiration of a fortnight after the departure of Mr. Vaughan to London—to the very day, I remembered afterwards—the gaunt female attendant at Nettlewood House asked to see me at the Ferry Inn. It was eight in the evening, and I was busy in “the best room,” writing home to my mother—a loving soul, who was not happy in her mind if I did not write home twice a week.

Letty showed her into the room, at my request.

“Well, Janet, no bad news, I hope?” was my first question.

“Na,” in a hesitative manner, “na bad news, exactly.”

“What is the matter, then? Mrs. Zitman——”

“Wants to see ye. And ye’d better coom at ance, or she’ll be after me in a flash like.”

“Certainly—I will come.”

I put the letter away in my desk, which I left unlocked, and prepared to accompany Long Janet to Nettlewood House. Passing out of the room, we came upon Mrs. Ray in suspicious contiguity to the outer side of the door.

“I war just a-coming to ask if anything had happened at the House,” she said, quietly.

Long Janet shook her head.

"Naithin', Mrs. Ray," she answered, sternly.

"What's wanted with Mr. Gear at this time of night, then? He'll catch his death of cold, after settling down afore the fire."

"I'll take care of my health, Mrs. Ray."

"Mrs Zitman's not ill?" she asked.

"Not ill!" echoed the serving woman.

"Oh! dear, what *can* it be, then?" moaned the old woman, giving up in despair her efforts to solve the mystery.

We heard her repeating this important question to herself when we were outside in the wind, and had closed the inn door behind us. We heard the door open also, the instant afterwards, and were very well assured that the weazen face of the old woman was watching our departure so long as our figures remained distinct from the dark night.

"That be an unpleasant auld woman," commented Janet, as she trudged on at my side, taking infinitely longer strides than myself.

"Slightly curious, that's all."

"She hae an eevil een. I can see the deevil shining oot o' it whene'er I coom across her."

"She's old and peevish, Janet."

"Gin I war like that, I'd put mysel' vera quietly oot o' the wa'."

She strode on, making no further comment, offering to throw no further light on the reason for my sudden call to Mrs. Zitman's house.

When we were close upon the great swing gate she condescended to address me again.

"Are ye a narvous mon?"

"I hope not—I think not."

"Do ye understand narves?"

"A little. My mother is a nervous woman in her way."

"Ye'll do, then, for ye will na laugh at her."

"Is Mrs. Zitman suffering from a nervous attack, then?"

"May na' she weel be that, living a' alane in the deesmallest hoose that e'er a mon built," she said, indignantly; "she who a' her leef ha' been delicate and full o' fancies. It only wanted ane friend to strengthen her wi' a stronger natur than her ain, and she ne'er got it. A's been agin her fra' the time I nussed her in my arms a wee thing."

"Indeed?" I answered. I was curious enough, or anxious enough to put my remark in an interrogative sense. The clue to finding an antidote for

Mrs. Zitman's unhappiness might suggest itself when I knew more of her story.

"Ay—indeed it ha'. Her father and mither war twa nervous critters, and e'er gave a sool the horrors — sharp eno' in their weets when the horrors warn a on 'em, though. I ne'er gat my lawfu' salary to this day. Then Mary——"

"Mary?"

"Mrs. Zitman as is — I ca' her Mary when we're alone thegither, ye must ken—got married to the rich mon who'd been in furrin parts, and he was narvous too, and na comfort to her. That's how it is."

"But her brother Herbert?"

"Narvous—narvous," she repeated twice.

I could not help expressing my doubts of that assertion.

"Guid bless him, but he is! He's my ain bairn; I weaned that laddie, and ken him weel as my ain richt hand. A better lad dinna live."

"Indeed."

"What do ye keep sayin' *indeed* for?" she asked sharply; "dinna ye beleieve what I say?"

"Why should I doubt you, Janet?" I answered; "I know nothing of Mr. Vaughan, and he has spent his life with you."

"Mark this, that he's the vera best o' men—that I say it to ye—that it will be alwa' proved sae, whate'er people may think o' him, or ha' to say agin him. A' his life's been a study for ithers, na' for hissel'. He may be seengular in his wa', and e'en she mayna understand him sometimes; but he means weel, though he gangs a different gait to wark to maist people. If it e'er cooms, which it weel," she added, sadly, "to partin' wi' ane or t'ither o' the bairnies, I shud brak my heart gin' I left him, which I wadna—never!"

The woman stamped upon the gravelled drive, and flung one long arm in the air like a telegraph signal in her excitement. I could not understand her. This new exposition of Vaughan's character was startling, and took away my breath. It was not compatible with all that I had suspected; and yet this woman, who was in earnest, had been with him from his cradle side. Every step forward seemed to bring the gloom more thickly on me; here was an impenetrable density, or was it a new light that dazzled me and disturbed my reasoning faculties?

In my astonishment I had almost forgotten the object of my visit, till she touched my arm as we stood under the portico.

"Tell her gude news aboot the hoose," she whispered, huskily; "and talk her, if you can, oot o' a' the foolishness."

"Have you failed, Janet?"

"Ech, but I'm as narvous as a kitten too. I ha' na lived wi' the family sic a mony years without catchin' the complaint. My faither, who was a Scotchman, banged me mony times for it before he deed. Guid save him! I think he banged it into my pow rather than oot."

A male servant opened the door, and looked surprised at my appearance. He stood with the door open, gaping vacantly at us, until Janet bade him make haste and shut the wind out of the house. After this exordium Janet preceded me to the drawing-room, announcing me in her usual manner:

"Mr. Gear's coom."

CHAPTER IV.

A NERVOUS DISORDER.

I ENTERED with the serving-woman, who closed the door, and advanced with me towards the slight figure in the damask-covered chair by the fireside.

I could see her face brighten as I advanced towards her. Shut up in that house, a prisoner for so long a time, the sight of one from the outer world, where the north-east wind blew, was a relief to her. Closer to her I saw that the face was paler than its wont, and that the anxious look which I had noted often there, was more predominant at that time than I had ever seen it.

"I am glad that you have come," she said, with a sigh of relief, "I have been anxious to

hear what progress you have made. Sit down, Mr. Gear, and tell me every word."

She dropped a little wearily into her chair again, and signalled me to take the seat before the fire. I obeyed the implied wish, and Janet Muckersie took up her station on the reverse side, facing her mistress, and with her head against the marble mantelpiece.

"Janet is my friend and companion in Herbert's absence," she said to me, as though explaining her presence there; "we talk all the evening of the old times' when we lived farther down the Vale in the little cottage close to Henlock."

An involuntary sigh escaped her. The little cottage, where she was a poor solicitor's daughter, was a happy retrospect, a home to be regretted in the days of her great wealth and young widowhood.

"We have made great progress, Mrs. Zitman."

"Ah! you promised me that you would," she said, with a pleased smile.

"I have increased the expenses to a considerable extent, Mrs. Zitman, in my desire to keep that promise to you."

"Any expense—any expense to see the last of this house!"

"Totally neglectful of your warning not to be

too extravagant, I have ordered a hundred extra men upon the works."

"Oh! thank you."

"And, after all, I can only promise you a roof to the house and two or three habitable rooms, which I dare not recommend you, for your health's sake, to inhabit."

"I will chance it," she said, firmly.

"I hope that you will seriously reflect upon the matter."

"Mr. Gear," with a strange look in her great grey eyes, "do you believe in haunted houses?"

"I do not."

"This house is full of noises. When I cross the landing to my bed-room, I do so with fear lest a hand should grasp my shoulder in my progress; I see strange figures in shadowy corners of the rooms; I pray for daylight ere the night has scarcely come, sir. What is this?—a disease?"

"A weakness caused by the solitary nature of your life."

"Then it will never get better. In the new house as in the old, it will pursue me."

"I hope not. A great deal of these fancies,

by a strong effort of your will, could, I am sure, be shaken off."

"Oh! I have tried all my life, so hard, sir! And I *have* a strong will of my own, and am quick to solve the mystery of a noise that startles half the household. Is not that true, Janet?"

"True as the Gaspel. Why, the noise we heard last nicht, ye guessed at better nor a buik. It war the rock splittin' at the back o' the hoose, that's a'."

"The rock splitting!" I exclaimed.

"The water in the rock arter the thaw, rather than the rock itsel'," explained Janet; "and bein' close aboon us, it soonds oddly, noo and then. Mrs. Zitman guessed it at ance—she and her brither coom o' a family that see thro' things vera clearly."

"But the window, Janet—the window of my room open in the morning!"

"Deed, and I did shut it," said Janet, with a shiver; "that's a thing which will poozle me till my dying day."

"You would rather keep me nervous, Janet, than own to that omission. You never forget, you say," she said, half-jestingly.

Janet raised her long arm in the air, her great

red hand fell emphatically upon her knee the moment afterwards.

"I ne'er forget. In a' my life I ne'er forgot ane thing warth rememberin'. Ye, my Mary, dinna ken a' that I ha' treasured oop."

The woman's expression of countenance was remarkable—the hard lines vanished; there was a look of sadness on her face, that was touching by its very earnestness; there were tears in the eyes generally so steely and unsympathetic.

"No bad thoughts of me, Janet."

"Guid bless ye, my lassie, na!"

"We will not say anything more about the window," Mrs. Zitman said, soothingly.

"Na; but we'll baith think o't, because it's na understandable at a'. It'll mak' my head ache mony a lang day. I'll swear tae shuttin' the window, and, what's mair, to knackin' o'er the alabaster feegur doin' it, an' catchin' it before it reached the grund—sae!"

She indicated the principle of catching suddenly at anything, in a very characteristic manner.

"Well," with a little shiver, "we will say no more about it."

"It's gien ye a cough, at a time when coughs

are dangerous. I'm ganging to ask about it, doon stairs, and pretty sharply tae, mind ye."

"We are wearying Mr. Gear," said Mrs. Zitman, turning to me again, "and he has to tell me all about the house, and his kind exertions in my behalf."

There was little to tell her that was interesting, but she listened with great intentness, and thanked me very warmly when I had concluded, for my efforts in her service.

"You are a faithful servant, sir—more, let me add, a faithful friend."

"Of both titles I am proud, madam."

"There must have been something more than common in the determination which led my brother to assert that your plan was the best sent in for competition. It was a long argument between us before I gave in, and let him have his way. Ah! Janet, I begin to fear he has his way too often."

"The bairn kens best. Is na he alwa' in the richt."

"You think so, Janet?"

"Tae be sure. Why shudna I, for that matter?"

Mrs. Zitman had piqued my curiosity rather

suddenly, and by a left-handed blow had come a shock to my vanity, which startled me considerably.

"You will pardon me, Mrs. Zitman, but you were speaking of the plans sent in for competition."

"Will you pardon *me* if I confess frankly that I did not admire your plan in the first instance?"

"I am very sorry," I confessed.

"We had many debates on the subject, Herbert and I. There were three plans of superior merit to the rest we thought—yours was one. We asked no reputed judge to decide for us—my brother is a little of an artist, as he is a little of everything, in his way. Of the three set aside for further consideration, I chose one sent in under the signature of 'Esperans.' My brother warmly supported yours. After a while I gave way to him, though he failed to convince me. There, Mr. Gear, see what it is to have a friend at court."

"Yes," I answered, thoughtfully.

"Would you like to see Esperans's plans?"

"Very much."

"Before they were sent home, I copied the perspective view, as a *souvenir* of the pleasant excite-

ment this competition scheme kept up for a while. It was a weapon of warfare ready to my hand, if Herbert and I ever fell into argument again. The woman's last word, Mr. Gear!"

She rose, and crossed the room to a little marqueterie table, from the drawer of which she drew forth a little coloured copy of the unfortunate Esperans's sketch. Resuming her seat she passed the sketch to me, with a more than common anxiety, with a hand that verily trembled, I believed. I took it from her, and attentively examined it.

There was a long pause; Mrs. Zitman watching every movement of my face.

"Well?" she said at last, in her impatience.

"Mrs. Zitman, I have robbed this man of two hundred and fifty pounds," I answered, in a voice which faltered somewhat, in spite of me.

"You say so—you think so?"

"The sketch, in point of general design, is as much above my own, as the work of a Titian is above the daub of a novice. This is a work of genius, and should have gained the prize, Mrs. Zitman. I have stepped in like a robber, and stolen it from him."

"No, Mr. Gear, not so bad as that. The com-

petitors were to abide by our decision, and it was made in your favour."

"Unfairly," I responded.

"No—don't say that."

"This man may be in poverty, Mrs. Zitman ; may have wasted time he could not spare, or wasted health by overtime far into the night ; may have prayed for this success, or for his one chance in the life that had been an arduous struggle with him. He may have put forth all his strength to this task, believing in the fairness of the project—and his plans are returned as unworthy of the prize for which he strove! It is a cruel favoritism that excludes the best, although it is too often practised in all professions, madam."

"You speak warmly—you are an honest man, Mr. Gear."

"I don't feel one to-night."

"You take a false view of the case."

"No."

"A Quixotic one."

Seeing my face flush, she said, hastily,

"Forgive me, I did not mean that. I am not often satirical, now I have lost all my old spirits. Give me the plan, Mr. Gear—I am sorry that I showed it to you."

"The superintendence of the work was not promised in the advertisement, and I do not feel to have betrayed him there—but that two hundred and fifty pounds——"

"If you say another word you will offend me," she exclaimed, impetuously; "if you think of giving up that money—I read it in your face—I will never speak to you again."

"But——"

"If you will know a secret unknown to my brother, and that secret will set your mind at ease, it must be. Wait a moment."

She had left the room the instant afterwards. Janet and I looked at each other, the former smiling grimly at her precipitation.

"She's forgatten a' about the dark landin' and the hoorrid moon-licht that stales in at the stoody winder," she chuckled; "I suppose it be the stoody where the lassie's gane noo."

Mrs. Zitman was back again with that portion of a banker's cheque-book termed professionally the stump end—that is the portion left after the cheques are torn out, and on which portion is a brief transcript of amounts paid away by the cheques aforesaid. This for the instruction of any unfortunate reader whose means are below cheque-

drawing, and who has never received a cheque in his life.*

"Here, Mr. Gear; now, let the matter rest, to oblige me."

The mutilated cheque-book was in my hands; on the counterfoil was written—"Esperans, £250."

She laughed at my surprise. How the musical ripple of that laugh welled through the room, and seemed to scare its sombreness away! The grim smile of satisfaction once again appeared on the face of Janet—in a different world, with different hopes, what a change would come to this girlish figure standing by me!

"My brother had his way, and Esperans, who I learned afterwards was a rich man with a large practice, obtained his two hundred and fifty pounds. But you will not betray me to Herbert?"

"I have no right to mention this, Mrs. Zitman, but——"

"There, there, the subject is dismissed. Let me soothe your wounded vanity by telling you my brother could see no talent in Esperans's performances, and that I —— why, that I am very glad you are here at Nettlewood instead of him."

The subject was dismissed; the time-piece ticking on the mantel-shelf warned me of the long

stay I had made, and suggested that Herbert Vaughan might have objected to it, in his absence. I rose to take my departure.

"Going?" she said, with her old weariness of look apparent again.

"If you will allow me."

"He need na keep awa sae lang agin," said Jane, looking at her mistress, "ye will be glad to hear about the new hoose, lassie?"

"Yes," she answered, turning quickly to me.

I could not resist the temptation to say that I would call again very shortly, *on business*. She did not answer, save by a smile, but I was more than satisfied. I took no credit to my own abilities for her desire to see me there; I knew too well that I was a break in the day's monotony, and so welcome to her for that reason. *For no other!*

I had shaken hands with her, when she said very suddenly—

"You will think me a very nervous woman, Mr. Gear, but I have an odd suspicion," sinking her voice to a whisper, "that this house is watched."

"In what manner?" I ejaculated.

"From without—in the high road, on the lawn in front. Not watched persistently, as though Janet and I were prisoners who might be tempted

to escape, but watched at uncertain intervals. *The house was watched last night, sir.*"

She had turned very pale—Janet clasping her two hands together, sat rigid with horror at this new suggestion of her mistress. I felt a slight chilling of the blood myself, but it was more at the scared face of this fair woman than at any fears conjured up by her remark. Those nerves would drive her mad in time, I thought.

At the same moment, a means of calming her fears suggested itself.

"If Mrs. Zitman will allow me to watch this house in my turn once a night, at uncertain intervals too—I am partial to a stroll after supper—and if I can assure you that once a night I shall be in the vicinity of Nettlewood House, perhaps you will be less subject to these morbid fancies."

"You think me very childish?" she said.

"No," I answered; "in so great a mansion, seeing so little change, it is natural to entertain some fears."

"I was a timid girl—it is natural, too, that I should not be a very confident woman."

"Quite natural."

"Then don't think me childish, if I say that I accept your kind offer very gratefully—that with

the knowledge of one true friend on the watch, I shall feel strengthened very much. Mr. Gear, I rely upon you. When you spoke so coolly of giving up two hundred and fifty pounds, I knew that you were a brave man."

"Far from brave, Mrs. Zitman."

"You will serve me, then, in this?"

"It will be the happiest service of my life."

That escaped me, but her bright eyes had bewildered me long since, and to see her face change so rapidly, so eloquently, did not conduce to my composure. That sowed the first suspicion there too—I saw it in the tell-tale blood which mounted to her cheeks, in the surprise which those eyes shone with on the instant.

"Good night," she said, a little abruptly.

"Good night, Mrs. Zitman."

"I rely upon you," she added, when I was at the door.

I bowed, but did not speak again. The door shut between us, and closed the interview.

There was a light in the corridor leading to the passage—some one flitted away as I passed from the drawing-room. Was it accident, or were there watchers in the house as well as out—household spies on every word and action? The door

opened again, and Janet followed me towards the hall. In the hall-chair asleep was the man who had admitted us—a pock-marked man, whom I had never regarded with much favour.

“A sleepin’ carl as ever war,” muttered Janet, after a disparaging elevation of her nose towards him; “fine sarvants are alwa’ fine and lazy, and that’s truth.”

“Good night, Janet,” I said, after she had opened the door for me.

“Gude nicht to ye, Mr. Gear. Ye’ll coom again?”

“Yes—presently.”

“She be glad to see ye—ye’re a relief, and what’s better, a friend too. Think how dull she is alane here, sir—ony a young lassie, noo.”

“Mr. Vaughan must be considered, Janet. It is scarcely etiquette to call here in his absence.”

“Am I na with the maistress alwa’?—Is she na bein’ killed by inches here?”

“Well, I have promised to come. Good night, Janet.”

“Gude nicht. Ye ha’ made a promees too that’ll mak’ twa meeserable wimen sleep soonder in their beds.”

She banged the door upon me to cut off the

admission of the north-easters, ever on the watch for entrance, and I went homewards, beset by an army of new thoughts.

CHAPTER V.

MRS. RAY APPEALS TO MY FEELINGS.

THERE was a mystery somewhere, and there was danger in its midst, I thought, as I went home that night. Amidst the many thoughts born of that one interview, that suspicion possessed me most on my homeward route, and kept the foremost place.

Presently there would be a change of position—much to make me unsettled, to fill me with a vague sense of pleasure at being her guardian, her faithful watch-dog, to bay at the fancies which her heated mind created, or to hunt down the spy who haunted her. There were thoughts, too, of all that I had said that night—of all the changing

shades of a nature very winning, very lovable, and which entranced me more and more.

I went home to the Ferry Inn in rather a dream-like condition; I pushed open the door of my room suddenly, and came upon Mrs. Ray standing before my desk, holding on by the table with one hand, and retaining in her disengaged claw the letter I had begun to my mother in the other. Bending down to place the epistle in closer proximity to the light, and glaring at the first page through glasses framed with tortoiseshell half an inch in width, she looked by the candlelight a witch at some unholy task. There was a cat rubbing its head against her elbow, to complete the similitude—a grey mongrel, which I had detested utterly from the first morning that I had fallen over it coming down the stairs to breakfast.

The coolness with which Mrs. Ray received me, was only equalled by the impertinence of her curiosity.

"I'm thinking it's not such a bad handwriting, Mr. Gear," she said, looking up as I entered.

"No, it's not bad," I answered, drily; "what do you think of the style?"

"Oh! I ain't read a line," was the reply, as she

placed the letter on my desk ; " only coming in to tidy up a bit, and finding the desk open——"

" Shut—surely !"

" Oh ! no—open, Mr. Gear."

This was too much for my power of endurance.

" I assure you, Mrs. Ray, I closed that desk."

" It might have been shut—it might have been open," she said, shifting her ground of argument, " it's of no consequence—there's nothing in the letter ! Sit down, young man, and don't look so cross about it. Come to the fire here, and listen to what's been troubling a poor soul so long."

The old woman dropped into a chair, and folded her hands in her lap. Her pitying look towards me was a strange one ; instinctively I sat down facing her.

" Mr. Gear," she began, " you're a handsome man—summut worn with a pile of hard thoughts like me, but young and handsome yet."

" Thank you for your flattering opinion, Mrs. Ray."

I said it sternly, to check further allusion to a subject which I fancied was about to be forced upon me. But the old woman, in her eagerness, appeared to take no notice.

" When you first came here, I told you of a

fair lady that it was possible to win," she said; "will you tell one, old enough to be your grandmother amost, if you have won her yet?"

"No."

"You see her very often—she sends for you now boldly, as if not ashamed of you. Mr. Gear, she's fallen in love with you!"

"You are wrong."

"If you will only say she has, I'll pray for your good luck as I never prayed in all my life. Oh! if you will only say that there's a chance of making her your wife, sir!"

"There is no chance, Mrs. Ray."

"She's a woman worth the loving—she's a handsome woman, with a heart that only longs to love some one worthy of her," this old witch whined.

"She is a woman as far above my reach or any poor ambition of mine, as the stars in the heavens overhead," I said; "she lives in a world apart from mine, and the daring of my thoughts ventures not thither to scare her with my vain audacity."

"But, sir—sir," Mrs. Ray began eagerly, "she——"

"Would be a poor woman, if it were in my

power to win her for a wife. I know the story, Mrs. Ray."

"Who told you that?"

"Her brother."

"He tried to scare you from the ring-dove early in the day, the villain!" she muttered; "he told you more than that: of the chances for me and mine, if she died or married. Well, that's all true, sir, every letter of it, and if the money were mine I shouldn't be hard upon her. You and I a-talking here quietly may see the way to a fortune for us both. How many thousands, now, could I afford to give you for your share in winning back my rights? Do think of it—pray think of it, young man! Look at my poverty and rags, and think what might bless my poor old age—think of your own chance, and of that woman being ground to death by a brother who thinks only of himself. Ha!—you jump at that—you're falling in love with Mary Zitman fast!"

"Leave the room, woman!" I cried, starting to my feet, "you insult me by your poor temptation."

"You will save her life by marrying her—I swear to you she'll die a madwoman—raving mad with fear—if you don't step in to save her! Sit

down—oh! do sit down' agin—and talk it over with me! I'm an old woman, and can read a woman's heart—it is easily got at by a careful man."

"Mrs. Ray, you *must* go!"

"There's a fair world for you and me, sir—we can help each other much, and make everything so different atween us! I don't mind what I promise, if you'll try the plan I have brooded on to win her. Do'ee sit down again, dear Mr. Gear?"

I shook my head.

"If you don't leave me I must go up-stairs. I can't—I will *not* bear this!" I cried, stamping my foot upon the floor.

"You're hard on an old woman. You won't listen—my God! why can't you listen to me?"

"You betray yourself and your own sordid lust for Mrs. Zitman's fortune. You insult me grievously."

"Why?"

"You would set me scheming for that poor woman's affections; you would teach me, if it were in your power, how to play the traitor to her; and how to drag her down to the sordid level which you think my nature. If I hear another

word of this, in any way, I must part company for ever."

"Oh! dear!"

I went to the door, and she got up, and made a dash towards me. Had I not escaped into the outer air, I believe that she would have gone down on her knees, and prayed me to listen to her sinful schemes. But I escaped, and went on along the high road, thankful that there had been no voice to tempt me from her withered lips—that the shadow of Zitman's money did not fall for an instant on the purity of my love for Zitman's widow. I went back to Nettlewood House, and fulfilled my first vigil there. All was still and silent as the grave, to the murky depths of which such love as mine must rest.

CHAPTER VI.

DOUBLE WATCH.

ONCE a night, at least, I paid a visit to Nettlewood House. Generally at a late hour, when those who menace danger might be thinking that the time was fitting for them. Once a night in any weather, under any circumstances, I found my way to Mrs. Zitman's house, strong in my power to protect her. Once a week I called at the mansion, generally in the morning, to report progress, and to receive cheques for the payment of the men. The builder made out his account for wages on the Friday afternoon; so that it was generally on the Saturday morning that Mrs. Zitman's cheques were

given me, and my information afforded her. The builder received the cheques and paid his men after his own fashion, consequently there was no occasion to seek Mr. Wenford's assistance in cashing the drafts, a step recommended by Herbert Vaughan prior to his departure.

A month passed away—no sign of Herbert Vaughan's reappearance was made at Nettlewood. The October, then the November weather rendered progress uncertain at the building; for days together the frost set in now, and kept all hands idle. Once Mrs. Zitman ventured forth, in defiance of the fiercest north-easter that had blown down the valley that year, and surprised me by her presence at the new house.

It had been freezing for three days, and the workmen that morning had stayed at home at Henlock. The carriage of Mrs. Zitman drew up before the works, whilst I was wandering somewhat idly about them, regretting the time lost by inaction. The window of the carriage was lowered, and the fair young face looked therefrom. I hastened towards it.

"I feared this, Mr. Gear," she said, with a sad glance at the deserted works; "if the frost continue, what becomes of my hope to settle down

here—to begin my new life here with the new year?”

“I think there are symptoms of a thaw apparent.”

“They will come from Henlock this afternoon if the frost break up. I will drive to Henlock at once, and see the builder,” she said, impatiently.

“Ye’d better coom hame,” said the hoarse voice of Janet, sitting very erect and rigid on the opposite side, with a black beaver bonnet tilted sideways through contact with the carriage roof; “p’raps if Mr. Gear hae naething better to do, he’ll coom hame too, and keep us company.”

“Oh! he is always very busy,” said Mrs. Zitman, with a timid glance towards me. It was a glance that made my heart leap, and said ‘Come,’ and yet I was strong-minded enough to refuse, to plead as an excuse that business to which she had alluded.

Long Janet rewarded me for my firmness by a most demoniacal frown. The woman’s anxiety to throw me into Mrs. Zitman’s company began to become noticeable; surely she was old enough to see the danger of it, to guess what might befall me if I saw her mistress more frequently. After all, she was a woman of very little consideration or

delicacy of feeling; or, in her anxiety to keep her mistress from too much loneliness, she cared only for me as one whose conversation might help to wile away the hours that passed so heavily at home.

"I think we will go to Henlock, then," suggested Mrs. Zitman.

"I'm thinkin' ye'll be as mad to attempt it, as ye war mad to coom oot the mornin'."

"We have the carriage."

"Ay, and the carriage winder oopen," added Janet, with a shudder.

"Well, we will go back again," she said, with a sigh, "if you will be so hard with me, Janet. Mr. Gear," pausing in the act of drawing up the carriage window, and speaking in a lower tone, "I must thank you very much for that constant watch of yours. I am ashamed of the trouble I have given you, and am anxious to relieve you from the task."

"I feel a satisfaction in my silent visits, that I hope you will not deprive me of."

"After all, they were but nervous fancies of mine, Mr. Gear. I have shaken them off now."

"Still, with your permission, I will keep my

watch here for the little time longer that I remain at Nettlewood."

"For the little time," she said, impetuously ; "what, are you thinking of leaving us, Mr. Gear?"

"My part at least is nearly played out here, Mrs. Zitman. With the completion of the roof will follow the completion of my task."

"Yes, yes—I had forgotten."

She drew the window hastily up, and leaned back in the carriage away from me. In another moment I was standing alone there, left to the pressure of business which had been my excuse for depriving me of the happiness of a visit to Nettlewood House.

The frost broke up late that afternoon ; too late for the men to come from Henlock to their work. Work began anew on the following day—life ran on in the old groove—Mrs. Ray no more persisted in her suggestions for making my fortune, but eyed me malevolently from a distance, as one who might have done her a good turn, and had been obstinate enough to turn my back upon it. Letty Ray working diligently during the morning, and brooding over the peat fire in the evening, was an everyday figure, which it seemed impossible could have a romantic side to it. We were nearing December

at last, and still Herbert Vaughan remained in London, and left his sister in her great house alone.

I continued my watch night after night; those lonely vigils in the neighbourhood of Nettlewood House did more to shake my resolution not to think of her, than I imagined at the time. There was a stepping apart from business life in them; there was the romance apart from business fostered in my silent watch.

Now and then it happened that the fall of a branch, the rustle of a leaf, suggested some intruder on the Nettlewood estate; but my search was vigorous and unprofitable, and the sword-stick which I carried with me came not into requisition for defensive purposes. In the first week of December there was at least an incident of a new character to render my watching less monotonous.

It had come on a storm of wind and rain at six in the evening; one of those fitful storms which every half hour give signs of intermission, and then disappoint one expectant of fair weather by setting in wilder and more boisterous. Still it was a night to tempt me out—a night when villainy might stalk abroad, confident of no watchers on its nefarious business. Mrs. Ray took note of my departure,

as usual ; I could see her head revolving round towards her shoulder, as I struggled with the wind in my efforts to close the inn door after me.

With some difficulty I made my way down the road, along which the wind swooped with a violence, that rendered keeping one's feet a matter of some difficulty. It was a night that raised my spirits ; there was resistance to my progress, and my cheek flushed to meet it. I felt more strong to encounter the unseen enemy who had eluded me so long—more able to cope with him, for Mary Zitman's sake. Before I went away for good, I was romantic enough to wish for some opportunity to distinguish myself in her service—to prove to her that I had not watched for nothing—or let a chance escape of playing the defender. And yet I was anxious to believe that there was no mystery abroad, save that which a nervous fancy had engendered—that Mary Zitman only required new scenes, a few faithful friends, to grow more brave, to look less troubled by unguessed at cares.

In the wind and rain I took up my post before the house that night, standing in the shadow of the high oaken fence which separated the estate from the high road, ending in a rock. Waiting thus, the second watcher came almost without

warning upon me—leaped the oaken fence, and stood before me struggling with the wind, that in his spring had found its way beneath the heavy horseman's cloak he wore. For a few moments we glared at each other—each on guard and prepared for attack ; it was not until a few moments had intervened, that from under the hat tightly pressed over his forehead, I recognized in the darkness the features of "Mad Wenford."

"Mr. Wenford !" I exclaimed then.

"Mr. Gear !" he answered.

"Pardon me," I said, "but may I ask the reason for your presence here ?"

"May I ask yours, fellow ?" he cried ; "what is the secret of your dodging about here night after night ?"

"How do you know it is night after night ?"

"No matter—I do know it."

"If you will reply fairly to my question, Mr. Wenford," I said, "I will answer yours."

I knew that he was straining his eyes very hard to see my face ; I felt that there was a suppressed passion struggling with the man, and it kept me careful of him. I loosened my sword in its stick instinctively.

"My reason, Mr. Gear, is to look after you.

I have been told of this new game of yours, and I think it requires explanation. Now?"

I disregarded the imperious style of his address, and answered him.

"I guard this house at the wish of its proprietress," I said, in my turn; "there have been strange noises heard about here, and stranger incidents, it has been hinted to me, have occurred. To discover a solution to the mystery, I have watched here for a short time every night—I think I am approaching that solution, Mr. Wenford."

He disregarded my meaning peroration; he drew his cloak more tightly round him, and coolly took his place side by side with me against the oaken fence.

"This is an odd affair. This is more odd than I believed."

The handle of a riding whip made its appearance from his cloak, and he proceeded to nibble at it thoughtfully.

"I'm not very quick at catching at ideas," he added, "don't interrupt me yet awhile, man."

I had no intention of disturbing his reverie. I was glad for a little grave deliberation myself. Wenford's puzzled air helped to puzzle me in my turn.

He collected his ideas at last.

"I believe you," he said, suddenly, "it agrees with Mrs. Zitman's nervousness, and you haven't been a man to wear a mask since I have known you. By ——!" he said violently, "the wrong scent that led me astray was the fancy that you had fallen in love with *her*."

"And if I had done so?"

"It had been more than your life's worth—I warned you of the danger of it, Gear."

"Had I been inclined to fall in love with Mrs. Zitman, I do not think I should have considered very seriously your warning."

"You are too rash—you venture too much on ground that is forbidden," he said, passionately. "Why did not Mrs. Zitman ask me to keep watch here instead of you? I would have served her better."

I did not reply to this.

"You have watched here some weeks, Gear. What have you heard?"

"Nothing."

"Gear," he cried, suddenly, "I believe that there has been knavery at work—that there are enemies working in the dark against that woman."

"You think this."

"Hers is a valuable life—on her death depends a great deal. By all that's holy, it can't be all fancy of the child's! But," with another oath, and an impatient stamp of his foot, "why are you set to watch here, instead of one who would have been as faithful as a hound in her service? That keeps me in the dark still."

"I am in the dark also, Mr. Wenford," I said; "there are spies set upon my actions, you have confessed—there is a complex machinery at work for or against me, which I resent—which I will not have!"

"This is a fine place for a secret society," he said, tauntingly. "Why, man, if you come this way every night, it is the most likely thing to be talked about in this place. The very dead in Henlock churchyard are glad of a gossip for a change! Take my advice, Mr. Gear, and resign your watch to me. I swear to God it will be a faithful one."

"I resign my post to no one."

"Mr. Gear," he said, his tall form towering above me, "you are a mystery to me at present. I don't know whether you will be a

friend or an enemy—I have been inclined to think you one, and then the other—you puzzle me, you puzzle more than me! You cross my path at awkward times, when the mad fit is on me, which people talk about down here. At night you trouble my dreams, wherein you are always thwarting me, standing between me and everything I wish. I am a dangerous man—they would tell you in the Vale that there are times when I stick at nothing. Be on your guard!”

“I will, sir.”

“Be treble on your guard, if you think of loving a woman that I’ve loved, or grasping at a prize that I have failed to reach. The day of reckoning will come swiftly on you, or Ned Wenford will be greatly changed.”

His boasting did not affect me much. To me it seemed the idle raving of a braggart, with no power to scare me from my purpose.

“Mr. Wenford, all this scarce needs a reply.”

“I fight openly—I warn my enemy that I am on his track. Mr. Gear, beware of me!”

He shook the gloved hand which grasped the whip menacingly at me, and then strode away down the road. I could hear him muttering his

threats to the wind and rain as they met him full front upon his journey home.

Thinking him more of a madman than ever, I followed in his wake a short while afterwards.

CHAPTER VII.

CARRIED AWAY.

IN the middle of December the roof was on the new house at Nettlewood; the building was completed, the architect's work was over. The north-east wind had suddenly vacated the valley, the frost had broken up, and a warm moist air had offered wondrous facilities for work. Old Cumberland folk—and there were many amongst the workmen on the place—professed never to have remembered so mild a time following on so sharp a season; it was like spring weather. All the snow on the mountain tops vanished away again, and the strip of meadow land on each side of Net-

tlewood Vale looked green and bright in its new youth.

Mrs. Zitman came every day to the works once more ; the pale face became less delicate, the troubled looks thereon perceptibly diminished, the light and life natural to one of her years played about her steps, and rendered her, in her impulsive-ness and brightness, a woman to be worshipped more than ever.

I forced myself to believe that I was glad my task had so rapidly attained completion—that I should spend my Christmas with my mother and sister, far away from the birth-place of my one romance. There was temptation in this lonely spot, and it grew a stronger enemy to cope with ; in the crowded London streets, which country people thought were fraught with danger, would be peace of mind and security for me. Away from her, the sober every-day existence would come back ; it would not be difficult—that was, not so very difficult—to live down the fantasy which had so utterly transformed me !

I had been ever a dreamer in my way, but this was the wildest vision that a man could foster. The romance had begun too late in life, and was of too much power to die out easily, and give no pain to

me. My own feeling of despair as the days grew less at Nettlewood should have warned me of the fallacy—possibly *did* warn me, though I closed my eyes, and went on blindly to the end.

The end came at last, before Herbert Vaughan's return.

The house was finished ; a fresh staff of workmen and decorators were busy at four rooms on the south side, so that if Mrs. Zitman's intentions held good, she could at least take possession of a portion of the premises, and shake the dust of Nettlewood House from her feet.

The builder considered himself responsible for the interior of the new edifice ; its adornments were beyond my province, there was no further reason for my stay there.

Mrs. Ray received a week's notice to quit from me. I went into the back room to deliver it. The old woman, sitting in her usual place, received it stoically. Letty Ray, standing with one arm on the back of her mother's chair, looked towards me steadily, almost regretfully.

"I'm thinking, sir," she said, "that we shall be sorry to lose you—I hope you have been comfortable here."

"Everything has been very good, very clean,

and very moderate. I have been obliged by a prompt attention to all my wishes. I have to thank you, Letty, for much kindness."

"Hark how patronizing he is," muttered the old woman; "it's as good as a play!"

"You will be glad to leave here," said Letty, after an impatient shake to the chair, by way of a hint to her mother, who, however, took it unkindly, and 'dratted' her for an impudent thing, shaking her up like that. Old Mrs. Ray's true colours were displaying themselves rapidly; my time was short; little more was to be gained from me; the recommendation of her house to my friends was not worth a halfpenny.

"You'll be glad to get home to your mother, Mr. Gear," she said, with a kind of sarcastic snarl at the fire, or at me, "and we shall be glad to have the inn to ourselves. Strange people trapesing about the place, and coming in at all times and seasons—in the middle of the night like a housebreaker, sometimes—are not to my taste, and though we must put up with all sorts, yet it is a comfort to know they're not going to worry us much longer."

"What time will you dine to-day, Mr. Gear?" inquired Letty, anxious to create a diversion and

break in upon her mother's imperfectly concealed personalities.

"At five, I think."

Mrs. Ray began to address the fire again.

"Strange people, giving themselves airs, sometimes——"

"Good morning, Mr. Gear," said Letty, nodding towards me to curtail the interview, during the progress of which I had been at least amused.

"Good morning."

"We had a man here once," said Mrs. Ray, "who might have made his fortune, and who was a fool—who took his own counsel, which kept him a poor critter all his life. To a word of good advice he never listened, and so he came to woe. A fool—the weakest of all fools, that man was!"

I was half-way down the passage before she had finished, but the old woman elevated her voice so that not a word should escape me. Outside, under the creaking sign-post, Letty followed me.

"You must not mind her, sir—she's old and querulous. All her life she has been fighting against one disappointment, and hers is not a nature to be grateful. I don't think you mind her, Mr. Gear?"

"Not much," I said, laughing.

"I shall remember your kindness, your gentlemanly consideration for us poor Ferry-keepers. I remember more than that," she added, meaningly.

I was going away, when she said quickly:

"You understood what my mother meant by the good advice to which you had never listened?"

"Oh! yes—very well indeed."

"The hope of Mrs. Zitman's marriage has preyed upon her every minute since her brother's death—the hope of Mrs. Zitman's money shines for ever in the fire over which she broods. We Rays are covetous and grasping, and envy our neighbour's goods with a rare intensity."

She turned away after this hard criticism, and I went on to Nettlewood House.

To Nettlewood House for the last time, perhaps! I had been thinking of the visit many days, and had finally found courage to attempt it. Several times I had hinted to Mrs. Zitman my intention of departure, but by some inexplicable means the subject had ever turned to matters foreign to it. Now the formal notice must be given her too, and then the preparation for going away made in earnest, and with an earnest look ahead at the life in store for me. Scarcely the old life, for I had saved money enough to begin business for my-

self in a little way. There was even a chance of partnership with my builder at Keswick, if I chose to settle down in the North. He and I had become intimate over our mutual efforts to push forward the erection of the building; he was a practical, honest North-countryman, who had saved a little money, but whose health was not good, and to whom an active partner would be of inestimable service. He had hinted to me several times that my perseverance under difficulties had amazed him and won his respect. With a partner like me, he could see his way to a very decent competence in the North. He was an old bachelor of forty-five, who wanted a partner and friend.

Still, Mr. Sanderson and I had not sat down together to talk seriously over the matter; I shunned the subject, and fancied that in London I could work my way better and more profitably; that in the turmoil going on there, I should find it so much easier to forget. After a while I assured myself that the country would become distasteful to me—that, the new house completed, the kind mistress said good-bye to, it would be a madness that would prey upon me to remain in Cumberland. Only forgetfulness for me in the busy haunts of men, where the fight goes on eternally

for fame and money, and there are a hundred rivals to struggle with you for each step you make. In the *melée* I should be better off; in the quiet mountain villages all that I had dreamed of would be ever face to face with me.

Possessed with this thought, I found myself in the great hall of Nettlewood House, waiting to be ushered into Mrs. Zitman's presence. The pòck-marked man, to whom I had taken an objection, and who appeared continually watching me from the corners of his bead-like eyes, preceded me along the corridors, and smiled sardonically when he announced me.

Mrs. Zitman was sitting alone in the library, a room into which I had not been shown before. A large and handsome room, impressed with rather more than the usual amount of gloom, owing to the dark bindings of the books, and the wall of rock that stood between the library windows and the light—the rock that rose rugged and fierce for a thousand feet above the mansion, and seemed hanging over it like a perpetual menace. Through the window nearest the lake, a gleam of sunshine stole fitfully into the room, and fell athwart the library table, and the fair head bending over it, marking with a broad band of light the scroll-work pattern

of the carpet. A room more full of shadow, I had never entered.

"It is like a grave," she said, with a little shudder, as though my thoughts on entering had suggested themselves immediately to her; "cold and chilly with the dead hopes that lie buried here. It is always a struggle with me to enter—a release to close the door behind me. You see I have managed to confiscate the one intrusive gleam of sunshine that has found courage to steal in."

"It is a dark room," I said; "but there is a very natural reason for it."

"Oh! I have not been thinking of an unnatural reason," she said, hastily; "save that there must be one, for Herbert's constituting this his favourite retreat, I fancy. But then, he is a studious man."

She looked at the myriad of papers with which the library table was heaped, and said—

"Will you take a seat, Mr. Gear? I have got into a whirl of figures here, and the business fit will not evaporate until you talk to me of the new home."

I took a seat, and watched her very intently; sitting there in the sunlight, the one figure which had shed its brightness on the prosaicism of my

life. She was looking fairer, better, and more beautiful. What an earnest face it was!—what cruelty of the dead or the living—which?—to have kept it so long shadowed by thoughts that should have been ever foreign to it! Young, rich and unfettered, her life should have been far different to this—the world before her something for the less fortunate to envy.

Her pen dropped, the papers were tossed restlessly away.

“Tell me about the house, Mr. Gear—I dismiss money matters *sine die*.”

She clasped her hands in the lap of her grey silk dress, and leaned forwards with a new earnestness.

“The house is finished, Mrs. Zitman.”

“I am so glad!—I am so happy!” she cried.

“And my task is finished with it. With your permission, Mrs. Zitman, I purpose to depart next Tuesday.”

“Next Tuesday, sir!” she murmured; “that is an early warning.”

“I should be robbing you if I were to remain longer, Mrs. Zitman. The building is finished; it is already in the hands of your upholsterers and

decorators. There will be three or four rooms soon completed, though I cannot advise you, for your health's sake, to take possession of them. If I might beg one favour of you before I go, Mrs. Zitman, it is, that you will delay your removal till the spring."

She did not appear to have heard me. She looked up from her study of the carpet, and said, without any attention to my last remarks—

"It is natural that you should be glad to escape. Nettlewood is a place which does not conjure up many pleasant associations at the best of times—you have seen it at its worst."

"I have spent my happiest days here," I exclaimed; "I could live here all my life!"

This outburst of fervour was beyond my power to repress—was in direct opposition to the ideas with which I had sought to influence my will. It was an unnatural effort, and so escaped in that hour to flush her cheek, and make her tremble with my rash vehemence.

"Happy days here!" she exclaimed, catching at once my fervour; "what is there in this place to make me believe in such a wish as that?"

I was on my guard now.

"I do not know, madam."

"Is it an indirect compliment to me?" she cried, scornfully; "an effort to imply that this house, and those within it, have tended to these happy days? It is a courtesy that sits ill upon you, and its very falsity shames you with its mock avowal. Don't tell me of happiness in Nettlewood!"

The barriers around me were broken down again by that charge. The shield of cold reserve was shattered from the love it sought to screen.

"Pardon me, but it has been a happiness which I dare not think of now, or in the future days when I am apart from here."

She looked toward me timidly; she had flushed a deeper crimson, and her hands were trembling more and more.

"I do not understand you," she said, in a faint whisper.

"I have not a right to seek to make you comprehend," I said; "to speak of my happiness will not enhance your own."

"I know no happiness," was the quick reply.

"You have all that can conduce to it, and it may come at any moment. It is in your own hands."

"All that can conduce to happiness?" she ex-

claimed—she started to her feet at this—“Mr. Gear, I have nothing! When you are in London, if you have time to think of me, remember me as the lonely woman growing old before her time, crushed down by the thoughts that can never grow more light, dispirited by want of sympathy, or of the companionship of one true friend. All that can conduce to happiness!” she repeated once more in a tone still more scornful, from the depth of its intensity, “that is the money which my husband left me! Oh! sir, I would pay it all away to-morrow for my ransom—I would prefer to be poor and struggling for my bread to escape the cruel thoughts that keep me weak—to emerge from the iciness of the world I am made to move in, to break the promises to which I have been bound, and feel myself free to act, and think, and speak. The riches that your selfish nature looks at as my felicity are the chains that drag me to despair.”

“No, no—don’t say that! Mrs. Zitman, you will say no more!” I cried.

I had sprung to my feet, and was facing her. We had both been under the spell of a strange emotion, that carried us apart from common life—my last movement warned her of her danger. She

sat down, passed a trembling hand across her face, and then looked at me with a faint forced smile.

"It is better not," she murmured, "I am a childish woman—you will excuse me."

She had changed; she was the patroness again, and I the poor dependant. Silently I drew back across the threshold of the romance which had nearly betrayed me to her feet.

"Pardon me too, Mrs. Zitman," I stammered, "I am strangely excited this morning—I am nearly forgetting my business habits. You will allow me to withdraw now?"

"Certainly."

"You will allow me even to take my farewell of you, madam. I have important business in London, and it is possible that I may leave at once."

"At once!"

She turned to the table, and looked for a while amongst the papers with which it was strewn—finding nothing to reward her search.

"Do you mean," she said at last, without turning her head towards me, "that it is possible you may leave here before Tuesday?"

"Very possible indeed."

"And the business——"

"Can be transacted by letter—little remains to explain or settle."

"Very well," was the almost cold answer.

I hesitated still; I did not like to go away—to part with her, and to feel that in a few moments I should vanish away from her for ever. But I had betrayed myself—my love—I was sure of that—and I had seen the fear of my avowal blanch her face as the secret hovered on my lips. Suddenly I went towards her, and held forth my hand.

"Mrs. Zitman—I will say good-bye now."

She turned and looked at me almost sadly. She rose from her chair again as she placed her little hand in mine.

"God bring you happiness in His good time, madam—good-bye."

"Good-bye," she answered softly.

I resigned her hand, stifling the impulse to raise it to my lips, and went away out of the room, along the corridor, into the hall, and thence into the Vale, meeting no one in my progress.

I walked about the Vale all day, restless and disturbed, planning a hundred methods of departure, and of change of life at home, and forgetting them all in thoughts of Mary Zitman before they reached maturity. The interview had been a

strange one, and had affected her strangely—every word I could remember, and every word had a mysterious attraction yet, and made my heart thrill and then sink again. I would go away to-morrow—for ever after to-morrow let the curtain fall upon this giant folly which had grown too powerful for my strength!

But the morrow came, and I lingered still; my resolution was not strong enough to tear myself away, although I saw no more of her, heard no more from her. I had alarmed her by the evidence of my presumptive thoughts, and she had shrunk back to her own self, amazed at my audacity. And yet—no, no, I would think no more of her; the next day I would really go away for ever!

And the next day came; my portmanteau was packed, I was firm in my resolve then, stern and inflexible as the fate setting me apart from her. I would go over the building again before I went to London, however. I would proceed to the old spot where the simple gothic mansion now made a feature in the green vale of Nettlewood. Wandering amidst the empty rooms, still so bare, and desolate, and damp, the thought struck me that she had not promised to keep aloof from them till the spring, and that I had not pressed upon her

sufficiently the danger to which she, a delicate woman, exposed herself by entering her new house too quickly. She was an impetuous woman; it had been her one wish to leave the gloomy mansion she inhabited before the Christmas came—she would exchange her residence at once, and endanger her health, I felt assured. And this should not be!—at the risk of offending her by seeing her again, and standing in the way of her intentions, I resolved to warn her, though all the renewed pain of parting with her was to add to my share of bitter memories.

Bitter memories! And as I went along the carriage drive of Nettlewood House, my heart plunged again with gladness at the chance of one more glimpse of her before I went away!

Mrs. Zitman was at home, as it was natural to expect. Mrs. Zitman was in the old library again, into which, after a while, the pock-marked lackey ushered me. In the library, at the same post, with the same gleam of sunshine falling upon her; it seemed as though my interview had never been abruptly broken off, and I had never said good-bye to her.

“You have not yet left us, then, Mr. Gear,” she said, a little coldly, as I advanced.

"Not yet," was my hoarse answer.

"Will you be seated? I will not detain you a moment. I am finishing a letter to my brother."

I sat down a little way apart from her, whilst she turned to the library table, and hurried off the letter which I had interrupted. I did not like this new coldness of demeanour, although I had brought it on myself, I was aware. She was on her guard now—she distrusted me!

"Now, sir."

She turned and looked steadily at me for a while, then the long-fringed lids veiled the eyes that could not stand against my sorrowful gaze towards her.

"Mrs. Zitman, before I go away to-day I have ventured to intrude again to ask one question."

"What is that?" she said, in a low tone, a tone strangely low and vibratory.

"I wish to ask if it be really your intention to take possession of the new house at once?"

"Directly there is a habitable room therein."

"But you have not fully made up your time?"

"I have," was the firm answer.

"Then I must forbid it," I answered, as firmly as herself, "there would be great danger—the damp will linger there for weeks yet; your health is delicate."

"Is this the object of your coming hither this morning?"

"It is."

"You promised me that the house should be finished—even habitable—on Christmas-day."

"I did my best, but I do not think——"

"I will chance it, sir."

"Mrs. Zitman, you shall not!"

She started at my imperious assertion; her colour changed; the blush that rendered her so beautiful mounted to her cheeks again.

"What difference can this make to you?"

"The difference between my happiness and unhappiness; the satisfaction of believing when I am apart from here that you are well, or the misery of thinking that I have been the means of injuring you."

"It is kind of you to think of this," she murmured, "and I will thank you for it."

"And will promise me?" I urged.

"Well, I have made no one *happy* in my life yet—I promise."

"Madam, I will think less of the satire than of your consent," I responded.

She saw that she had pained me, and she changed

colour again. She was ever anxious that I should not go away stung by any word of hers.

"Forgive me, but you spoke of happiness in a strange manner, as if any promise of mine could make you, a man of the world, happy!"

"*As if!*" I echoed.

She shrank in the chair at my reply, and then glanced timidly towards me.

"A man of the world, too," I re-echoed; "that is a hard title to bestow upon me."

"Why?"

"I have heard you speak of worldly men with such contemptuous scorn."

"All men are worldly, are they not?"

"In one sense, possibly, but not in the sense which you have more than once conveyed to me. You called my nature selfish in our last interview. Was it just?"

"You treasure my words, Mr. Gear."

"Yes."

"And it *was* a worldly man setting store by the world's wealth, who could assert that I *was* in the possession of all that could conduce to happiness."

"I was not thinking of your money, or that that alone could bring you peace."

"I am a woman without a fair hope in the world," she said; "had I been poor, I should have known many friends; with an interdict upon seeking one honest friendship, I have been shut away from all that makes the heart light. Mr. Gear," turning to me with her proud face full of an indignant protest against man's sordidness, and her own hard fate, "you will leave here a wiser man—you will tell those who think of gold as the one god to bow the knee to, that there are a few mad people to whom its possession is a curse."

"Will you say more?"

"What more is there left me to say?"

"Tell me again, as in our last meeting, that you would prefer to be poor, to escape the cruel thoughts which keep you weak, to break the chains which drag you to despair—you said despair!" I cried.

"I do not retract the word."

I had risen and was leaning over her; she trembled very much now, she bent her head away from me more and more.

"Then ask me to stay, and be the one friend in whom you may ever trust—tell me that you will—that you will submit your fate to my hands, leaving to me—a poor man, whose chances of success in

life are not apparent yet—to bring that happiness to you from which wealth has shut you out. Madam, I hate those riches too, with all my soul—without them I should have uttered long ago that which I dare, in the face of your avowal, to confess here at your feet. I love you !”

I flung myself before her, and caught at her white, trembling hands ; she was looking down at me with a face of alarm, and yet with a face that did not daunt me, now the floodgates of my heart were loosed. At her feet, and clasping still the hands which, after the first struggle, were left within my own, I told my story—rambling, incoherent, and marred by my rapidity of utterance, but comprehensible, and, after a while, welcome to her.

“Mrs. Zitman—Mary—you will answer me. You will tell me that I have not been too bold in loving you ?”

“You—you love me !” she whispered ; “is it possible that you are willing to burden yourself with a poor, nervous woman, and see the golden vision fade away for ever from us both. You, Canute Gear, have the courage to attempt MY RANSOM, and create anew a world for me ?”

"It will be happiness, Mary. Will you venture with me?"

She bent down over me and cried a little. I pressed her to my throbbing breast, and her own white hands clasped my neck, and did not thrust away my face from hers.

"Will I venture with you?—will I believe in this love which I have seen and feared and hoped for?—with all my heart, how willingly!" she sobbed.

* * * * *

"Ech! Guid save us, but this is a scene for a pictur that'd astonish yeer brither," exclaimed Long Janet, entering the room, and staring at us standing side by side in the sunshine, which had fallen on us both!

"Dear old faithful friend," said Mrs. Zitman, leaving me to approach her with both hands extended, "I have broken my promise to Herbert—the cruel promise extorted from me before he went away—but you, at least, will wish me joy."

"Nane sooner, or wi' mair heart in the wish," said Janet, seizing the white hands in her own rough red ones, and shaking them vigorously up and down, "hae na' I seen it cooming on this lang while—did na' it seem as if I war boond to struggle

for it in my ain wa', kenning what war best for ye?"

"Did *you* know that, that Mr. Canute was thinking of me, just a little?"

"'Deed, and I kenned it a'. And 'deed, didna it strike me that he war the mon to make ye happy—clever and braw-lookin', and a bauld mon, too, to keep yer ain seelly narves frae gie'in' wa'."

"Thank you, Janet."

"Lord be gude to us! didna' I do my best to bring ye twa thegither, kenning what the lassie would be after ye'd gane awa wi' the leetle brak o' better times ye'd brought wi' ye. War I blind eno' not to see it a-growing upo' her?"

"Did I betray the love that was taking root in my heart?" said Mary. "And oh! Canute," turning to me, "have I betrayed it too soon or too boldly—asked you to have pity on me and not leave me in desolate grandeur here? What did I say?" she said, with a pretty bewilderment, that made me long to clasp her to my heart again; "pray tell me all that I said in my excitement?"

"Some day, when that desolate grandeur has faded away like a dream."

"And left me, Canute, oh! so poor!" •

"No—but, oh! so rich!"

"And—and Herbert? My brother, who is to go down the hill with me, who did not leave me in October last until I had promised him to remain rich and single for his sake. I am very selfish not to think of him a little more," she said.

Janet broke in here.

"He's a stout bairn. If ye can bear the change, he can wi' his ain money, and wi' that clear luke ahead that dinna lose sight o' the bast chance. And if he canna bear it, I dinna see that ye are boond to sink yer happiness for the sak o' his ain. That's the licht I put it in."

"The best light, Janet, and the truest," I replied.

"This ha' been an unlooky hoose—we are well shut o' it," said Janet; "we ha' had lots o' servants, and they're na troostworthy or hanest. I caught the pock-marked loon leestin' at the stody door here."

Mary Zitman turned to me with a little of her old nervousness apparent, but she met my bright smile and returned it.

"We need not fear how soon the news spreads," I said; "we need not let the days lengthen very much before we seek for happiness side by side, Mary."

“And the new house, Canute?”

We three broke into a merry laugh together, as the same idea seized us simultaneously. How the shadows which had haunted that room so long must have huddled closer together that day, at this unusual demonstration.

“We must leave that to good Mrs. Ray!” I answered.

END OF VOL. I.

